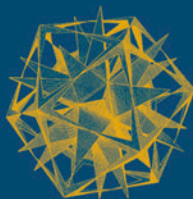


# How Prophecy Lives

EDITED BY

Diana G. Tumminia  
and William H. Swatos, Jr.



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BRILL

## How Prophecy Lives

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William H. Swatos, Jr.

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## PREFACE

### THE ONLY WAY INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

WILLIAM H. SWATOS, JR.

As World War II events drew U.S. involvement ever closer, the Niebuhr brothers engaged in what became an important exchange in *Christian Century* for mid-twentieth century American religion. It involved the realist preacher Reinhold, sometimes called prophetic, arguing for American involvement in the European theatre, while scholar Richard was a pacifist. Richard started it with "The Grace of Doing Nothing." Reinhold responded with "Must We Do Nothing?" Richard, however, won the debating point—if not the day—with the riposte: "The Only Way Into the Kingdom of God." The events of history, of course, proved Richard wrong and Reinhold right, though Richard long outlived him, and so won the day in his own way by influencing another generation during the Viet Nam era.

What do we make of prophecy? There is reason to think that prophecy exists in one form or another in every religion—or at least in every religion that perdures. In some religions it has a mystical or esoteric quality, while in others it carries more moral freight, which Max Weber would subdivide between the exemplary and ethical prophet in the carrying out of the task. As we come to look at this collection of assessments of prophecy principally in our own time, we see that prophetic kinds of religious expressions and experiences have perdured with amazing vigor—admittedly often in small-case settings—into the twenty-first century. While Phillips Brooks may have written correctly of the infant Jesus that "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight," tomorrow things can also be different. Neither Jesus nor any other figure of the world's religions has ended the dynamism of new religious revelations—west, east, north, or south. And though Paul the apostle in his inimitable soliloquy on love (1 Cor. 13) would state that, "whether there be prophecies, they shall fail," even within Christianity "new prophets" arise—"to lead astray," as Paul regretfully admits elsewhere, "even the elect." Perhaps, indeed, instead of the whimper that T.S. Eliot puts at the end of the world, the reality will be one last prophet crying out, with no one to hear.



Does the irony not strike you that the stimulus to over fifty years of social scientific research on prophecy began with a book called *When Prophecy Fails*? I couldn't help but notice. But I might not have been so engaged by it if had not also been for the 2005 publication of Diana Tumminia's *When Prophecy Never Fails*. I had followed Diana's work for about fifteen years by the time that *When Prophecy Fails* turned fifty in 2006, and the juxtaposition of these two publication events seemed just too good to pass up. Together we organized two sessions at that fall's RRA/SSSR meetings, and out of them the present volume began to emerge. Progress often comes more slowly than one would like, but working with our colleagues who have contributed chapters to this volume—some of which come directly out of those sessions—we offer now both a summary assessment and forward look at prophecy research.

## INTRODUCTION

### HOW FAILURE SUCCEEDS

DIANA G. TUMMINIA

In 1956 Leon Festinger and two of his graduate students published a case study of a flying-saucer group whose leader's prophetic pronouncements had failed to be fulfilled: *When Prophecy Fails*. Mrs. Keech, the pseudonym for the prophet, seemed like an anomaly then. Although the book received relatively limited coverage at the time of its publication, the burgeoning field of new religious movements (NRMs), often referred to at the time as "cults," that began to appear as a significant movement in the United States and other parts of the world about a decade after the publication of *When Prophecy Fails* drew considerable attention to the book—especially with respect to its theory of prophetic disconfirmation. Intensive and extensive debate over the nature of NRMs and their expected outcomes have centered upon what came to be known throughout the field as "the Festinger thesis."

The fiftieth anniversary of this book's publication provided an opportunity for a number of scholars in the social scientific study of religion and the study of NRMs to reflect on various aspects of this book and on both the general corpus of data that has grown from the thesis, as well as new case study materials. This volume brings together these analyses from different perspectives. The editors acknowledge the early participants, Jon R. Stone (in absentia), Ralph W. Hood, Jr., and Benton Johnson, who read their original papers at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR) and the Religious Research Association (RRA) meetings for the "Festinger at Fifty" session, which convened in Portland, Oregon during September 2006. Some of the authors, including myself, subsequently and unexpectedly experienced the loss of spouses and other loved ones whose deaths occurred during the making of this book. These profound events affected the timeliness of the publication, which had been originally considered possible in much closer succession to the 50th anniversary of the publication of *When Prophecy Fails* by Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley S. Schachter. So despite personal loss for some and the overscheduled, overworked lives of many

of our authors, we finally came together to finish the project. Co-editor William H. Swatos, Jr. should be acknowledged first for keeping the faith during all those uncertain times.

*When Prophecy Fails* still inspires students of social psychology and religion, as well as aging professors who ponder its genius and its contradictions. Although many chapters in the present volume may critique this classic, we as researchers all stood on the wide shoulders of Festinger *et al.* (1956) while conducting our investigations into groups with prophecies. From my standpoint, our book emerges more from homage than overdone criticism, more from appreciation than fault finding. It is intended both for specialists in the field and for those who seek a general social scientific evaluation of the growth and decline of religious movements in our time. Each chapter adds to the diversity of views on *When Prophecy Fails* and its related issues.

#### *A Nod to Festinger et al.*

Leon Festinger will always be remembered in social psychology. His body of works, experiments, and production of graduate students propelled him into the social psychological stratosphere (Moscovici 1989, Baron and Byrne 1991, Wiggins, Wiggins and Vander Zander 1991). Coming back down to earth, we need to deal with cognitive dissonance—although that hardly describes the extent of his work. Simply put, the term cognitive dissonance remains indispensable in social psychology as it describes the contradictory attitudes and behaviors humans encounter every day, as long as we enter the situation voluntarily (Festinger *et al.* 1956: 25–30, Festinger 1957). The more committed we are to our actions and the more effort we have invested in them, the more our feelings heighten the incongruity between our attitudes and our interactions with others. My former undergraduate students easily detected its function in their lives as they wrote about it on our electronic discussion board for our social psychology class. For instance, one student wrote in the spring of 2011:

My younger sister got pregnant recently and she did not want the baby. She was in a really bad relationship. I think abortion is wrong. I don't think I would ever get an abortion. When my sister asked me to support her during that really tough time for her, I had to decide what was more important: my stand on abortion or what was best for my little sister. I really felt cognitive dissonance. I felt sick about the situation, but I drove her to her clinic appointments and I also took care of

her after the operation. In the end, I know I did the right thing because family is more important than ideals.

Cognitive dissonance becomes easily recognizable when we experience inconsistencies in our attitudes or between our attitudes and our behaviors. This dissonance must be reconciled. The usual solution to reducing dissonance would be to change one's attitudes, or one's perceptions of the inconsistency, or else the inconsistent behavior so as to return consonance. In this previous example, the student changed her perception of her action, then explained it to herself.

About ten years ago, on a faculty salary I could afford only basic cable television. One of the channels I really desired to see was the History Channel. I did not want to pay more money for more stations. After looking at the program listing, I resolved my dissonance by saying, "Look, most of the programs on the History Channel are about war. I am not missing anything." In other words, I changed my attitude to coincide with my thrifty habits. When I made more money and after some tough negotiations with the cable company to lower prices, I contracted for some premium channels, and yes, you guessed it: what I watch most now are the *five* History Channels. I resolved my dissonance by paying some extra money, thus changing my behavior and dropping my previous rationalizations.

These are two simple examples. Cognitive dissonance is easy to spot in a controlled experiment and even in short-term observations. In social psychology, cognitive dissonance has taken on a life of its own with many permutations accompanied by dozens of qualifications on its situational applicability (Harmon-Jones and Mills 1999, Travis and Aronson 2007). This book will touch generally on *When Prophecy Fails*, including its oft-quoted five conditions for cognitive dissonance resolution (Festinger *et al.* 1956: 3–6), to which reference is made many times in the following chapters. Not seeing the fulfillment of a prophecy ranks much higher on a dissonance scale, and prophetic dissonance can involve larger time spans of emotional investment. Nevertheless, many scholars start with Festinger on prophecy as they make their own conclusions from their own research. Jon R. Stone's anthology, *Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy* (2000) put together the formerly separate and hard to find previous research on disconfirmed prophecy. Our volume endeavors to add more to the body of literature on this field.

Numerous authors on the subject of *When Prophecy Fails* reference only Festinger without the ubiquitous *et al.* The book's foreword, however, clearly states (1956: vi):

The publication of a collaborative work sometimes raises questions among readers about what share of the credit (or blame) should be given to each author. We all contributed equally to the study and have tried to avoid the problem of seniority of authorship by arraying our names on the title page alphabetically.

Leon Festinger  
Henry W. Riecken  
Stanley Schachter  
December 21, 1955

Although I am making a only minor point to acknowledge Riecken and Schachter, their intellectual abilities and contributions to the project ought to be recognized. Schachter eventually eclipsed Festinger in his contributions to social psychology, and Riecken also remains highly regarded. They began *When Prophecy Fails* by calling the “Seekers” a “social movement” and by comparing it to others with failed prophecies (1956: v). They gave their subjects dignity as they approached their infiltration into the Seekers as a field experiment. They stressed the social organizational aspect with their well-noted five conditions: conviction, commitment to the conviction, empiricism—i.e., the conviction “must be sufficiently specific and sufficiently concerned with the real world so that events may unequivocally refute the belief”—disconfirmation must be recognized, and the believer should have social support (1956: 4).

### *Where Now Do We Stand? The Present Collection*

“Revisiting *When Prophecy Fails*” by Benton Johnson summarizes the comments of the social scientists who reviewed the book at the time of its initial publication. Although many considered the narrative portions of the book a “good read,” none praised its theory of cognitive dissonance. While *When Prophecy Fails* documents the rich cognitive work involved in fashioning the religious group’s culture and interpreting the challenges it faced, the theory of cognitive dissonance appeared incapable of conceptualizing this process. A 1958 parody of the theory, Johnson notes, helps remedy this defect and shows that the cognitive processes documented in *When Prophecy Fails* are not limited to the sphere of religion.

Across the past fifty years, two distinct literatures dealing with cognitive dissonance theory and the issues of failed prophecy have appeared. Ralph W. Hood, Jr.’s “Where Prophecy Lives: Psychological and Sociolog-

ical Studies of Cognitive Dissonance” examines the increasing sociological and psychological gap that followed in the wake of *When Prophecy Fails*.

Sociologically-oriented social psychologists have tended to use participant observation and qualitative methods that mimic the original work of Festinger and his colleagues. However, this research is largely critical of Festinger’s work and finds that prophecy seldom fails in the real world. Instead, various strategies are utilized to renegotiate the prophetic messages to followers so that it is only in the eyes of outsiders that the message appears as having “failed.” On the other hand, psychologically-oriented social psychologists have followed Festinger’s move into the laboratory and have focused upon experimental techniques directed at dissonance reduction mechanisms aroused when beliefs are disconfirmed. However, prophecy itself has not been ignored. This research is largely quantitatively-oriented and assumes that the experimenter can objectively determine that a belief has been decidedly disconfirmed. This research tradition has produced a consensus among psychologists that disconfirmation of strongly held beliefs leads to enhanced belief commitment. The two different research traditions lead to radically different views as to the value of cognitive dissonance theory. The issue is not whether prophecy fails, but where—in the laboratory or in the “real world”?

Jon R. Stone’s “The Festinger Theory on Failed Prophecy and Dissonance” considers some longstanding questions. Scholars have focused the reliability of *When Prophecy Fails* on one statement; it holds true if, and only if, the failed prophecy results in believers actively proselytizing others. Stone suggests additional lines of inquiry that have heretofore been overlooked. Despite researchers’ fixation on disproving Festinger’s main thesis on proselytism as a response to failed prophecy, the story that Festinger and his colleagues tell about the “Lake City Flying Saucer Club,” led by Mrs. Keech, offers researchers additional lines of inquiry to pursue, namely, the interrelated nature of prophecy and cognitive dissonance. Although Festinger argues that failed prophecy results in dissonance, it seems just as likely—if not more likely—that dissonance creates the conditions under which a prophecy or a series of prophecies is uttered. He analyzes the central role that prophetic utterances played in reducing cognitive dissonance among members of Mrs. Keech’s “Lake City” group, including the shaping of her prophecies to conform to the beliefs and expectations of her followers, the weighing by Lake City members of contradictory prophecies offered by Mrs. Lowell (Mrs. Keech’s prophetic

rival in the group), and the attempts by Mrs. Keech to forestall member's loss of confidence in her prophetic gifts by modifying her predictions.

Lorne L. Dawson's chapter, entitled "Clearing the Underbrush: Moving beyond Festinger to a New Paradigm for the Study of Failed Prophecy," sheds more theoretical light for the future of disconfirmed prophecy. When prophecies fail to come true, believers are often shocked and disappointed, but it is rare for these failures to result in the dire consequences outsiders expect. Counter-intuitively, the vast majority of groups weather the storm of disconfirmation quite well. Social scientists and historians of religion have long wondered why Festinger, Riecken and Schachter first drew attention to this unusual state of affairs in *When Prophecy Fails*, postulating the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance to explain it. A steady stream of case studies has tested Festinger *et al.*'s theory, with mixed results. Consequently, recent studies have called for a conceptual reorientation away from the specifics of cognitive dissonance theory to the study of the more generic social-psychological processes of dissonance management in religious groups.

Salvador Murguia introduces us to the prophetic career of a modern Japanese prophet, Chino Yuko. "When Prophets Fail to Fail: A Case Study of Yuko Chino, *Chino Shoho*, and the Pana-Wave Laboratory" tells the story of the so-called "white cult" and its evolution of beliefs and activities. This chapter explores a little known group and its efforts to shield itself from supposed damaging radiation. Murguia's research explains the complex roots of this contactee group or "flying-saucer" cult. Pana-Wave garnered little international news. Luckily, Murguia records the spiritual career of this female charismatic leader, showing us that Festinger *et al.*'s Mrs. Keech has a counterpart in Japan.

In "Leadership and the Impact of Failed Prophecies on New Religious Movements: The Case of the Church Universal and Triumphant," Lorne L. Dawson and Bradley C. Whitsel examine Elizabeth Clare Prophet, the charismatic leader of the Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT). In early October 1986, Prophet received spiritual messages warning that the United States would be subject to a first strike nuclear attack by the Soviet Union. On Thanksgiving Day 1986, Prophet urged her followers to construct of bomb shelters on CUT's ranch in Montana. On March 15, 1990, several thousand of CUT's members crowded into the massive shelters they had built. Dawson and Whitsel theoretically analyze the failed prophecy

In the chapter "Failed Prophecy and Group Demise: The Case of Chen Tao," Stuart A. Wright and Arthur L. Greil detail the apocalyptic expect-

tation and disconfirmation in a Taiwanese UFO group. In the summer of 1997 approximately 140 emigrant members of a little-known Taiwanese UFO group, Chen Tao, appeared in Garland, Texas (near Dallas) and declared the site a holy place where God would descend from heaven. By December the group's founder and prophet, Master Chen, assigned an exact date for the advent: March 31, 1998. The prophet also announced that God would appear on TV channel 18 in the Dallas area six days before the date to warn earth's inhabitants of the coming tribulation. The apocalyptic warning sparked public alarm in the wake of the collective suicides by thirty-nine members of Heaven's Gate, a UPO group in California less than a year before. As the apocalyptic date drew near, a swarm of media surrounded the group's residence in Garland. On March 25, the failure of a divine appearance on channel 18 prompted Master Chen to retract his prophecy. On March 31, Chen called a press conference to minimize inconsistencies and declare partial fulfillment of the prediction. The prophet announced that God had pushed the apocalyptic date back to 1999. The group departed Garland in May and relocated to Lockport, New York. Wright and Greil traveled to Lockport in the summer of 1999 and interviewed Master Chen and other members to assess the adjustment of the group to the disconfirmation of the prophecy. Findings suggest that the leader adopted a fluid reinterpretation of prophetic events in the face of disconfirmation that sustained the group for a temporary period. However, unlike the findings of Festinger, Riecken and Schachter, who found that the group survived the prophetic failure through a readjustment process of cognitive dissonance, Chen Tao eventually disintegrated, and its members returned to Taiwan.

"A Square Theory in a Round Reality: Thoughts on the Study of the Unarius Prophecy" reviews my ethnographic study of the Unarius Academy of Science and its prophecy of the coming of 33 or more spaceships in 2001. Uriel's prediction of the start of a new millennium of peace and technology went without physical confirmation. Based on almost two decades of research, I argue the situational necessity of shifting from Festinger *et al.*'s theory as delineated in *When Prophecy Fails* to a more multidimensional analysis of prophecy as a functional reality within a spiritual group. A delineation of my field experiences will explain why I veered away from Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory to focus more upon phenomenological approaches to studying prophecy.



### Conclusion

On a personal note, I must confess that I was reared on Christian, Roman Catholic Marian prophecy, such as Our Lady of Fatima and the story of Saint Bernadette of Lourdes. As a child, my father often took me to the movies where I learned about romantic love from MGM musicals. How silly it was to believe in flying saucers (although they made for cinematic thrills), and how absolutely positively real religious prophecy was! Reinforced by my parochial school curriculum and bouts with low blood sugar due to fasting, I deeply experienced the reality of that belief until I matured.

Although there looks to be no shortage of believers, a vast segment of the general public is more blasé about prophecy these days. The rock band, The Who, bellowed the definitive statement: “We Won’t Get Fooled Again.” They sang (or rather screeched) a post-modern manifesto. Pity people do not remember the lyrics or The Who. As of this writing, there exist some recently well publicized failed prophets (e.g., Warren Jeffs, Michael Travesser, and Harold Camping). The so-called Mayan prophecy predicts the end of the world on December 21, 2012. I ask you: “Who’s afraid of 2012?”

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## CHAPTER ONE

### REVISITING *WHEN PROPHECY FAILS*

BENTON JOHNSON

The editors' request was simple and to the point: They wanted me to reminisce about how social scientists reacted to *When Prophecy Fails* when it was published. In 1956, I was a young assistant professor, and I would surely remember how my colleagues and I responded to the book. Would I be willing to make a 20-minute presentation at the panel he was assembling to commemorate the 50th anniversary of its appearance? I hesitated before accepting, because I was embarrassed to admit that I could not recall much about how the book was received. I remembered that it was a participant observation study of a flying-saucer cult whose leader had made a prophecy that failed to come true. I also remembered that the authors introduced a new approach in social psychology known as *cognitive dissonance theory*, which correctly predicted that some cult members would respond to the disconfirmation of the prophecy by redoubling their efforts to recruit new members. I had a vague memory of being puzzled that disconfirmation of a prophecy would inspire a new round of proselytizing. I had no memory at all of what reviewers had to say about the book. It would take me less than five minutes to report these recollections.

I accepted the invitation with the understanding that I would augment my sketchy recollections with an overview of how the critics of *When Prophecy Fails* responded to the book when it was published. Did they praise cognitive dissonance theory as an imaginative breakthrough? Did they admire the authors' review of how religious believers reacted to celebrated instances of past prophecies that failed? Did they commend the use of participant observation methods? Did they agree that the authors' key hypothesis had been confirmed? Or were the reviewers divided in their opinions? This quest might yield some interesting information that would stimulate a lively discussion among the panelists and audience members. In any event, it would provide enough material for a 20-minute talk. The quest, in fact, yielded a number of surprises, which in turn prompted me to re-examine *When Prophecy Fails* myself and to draw

some conclusions about how people cope with cognitive dissonance that it would never have occurred to me to draw before. This chapter is the story of how that quest proceeded.

### *What the Reviewers Said*

I restricted my survey to the reviews in English-language academic journals of sociology, psychology, and political science that were published in North America and Europe and were available either online or in my university library. All of the reviews were published soon after *When Prophecy Fails* appeared.

I was able to locate only ten items that could properly be called reviews. One reason for the short supply is that many of today's scholarly journals did not exist in the 1950s. Among those that did not were the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, the *Review of Religious Research*, *Sociology of Religion*, *Zygon*, the *Canadian Sociological Review*, *Sociological Focus*, and the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*. Several journals that did exist in the 1950s had no book review section. These included the *Journal of Social Issues*, the *Southwestern Social Sciences Quarterly*, *Social Compass*, the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, and the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. Some of these published a list of books received and a few published brief summaries of books, but none summarized *When Prophecy Fails*. Four major journals that did carry reviews failed to review this one: *Social Forces*, *Social Problems*, *Social Research*, and the *British Journal of Sociology*.

The ten reviews I located appeared in *Sociological Review*, *Sociology and Social Research*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, the *British Journal of Psychology*, the *American Journal of Psychology*, the *American Sociological Review*, the *American Journal of Sociology*, the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *Contemporary Psychology*, and the *American Catholic Sociological Review* (predecessor to *Sociology of Religion*). One of the reviews was brief and unsigned. I was a bit surprised to discover that the most positive comments about *When Prophecy Fails* concerned the lively way the authors presented their material. Five of the ten reviewers mentioned this matter, and they all agreed that the book was a page-turner. One reviewer called it an "excellent job of reporting," another considered it "a first-class descriptive record," a third reviewer thought it was "first-rate bedside reading," a fourth found it "eminently readable," and a fifth pronounced it an "exciting, often

astounding narrative” that might herald a “new genre—the mild psychological thriller.” Yet another deemed it “a bold and imaginative piece of research.”

On the other hand, I was not surprised that the five reviewers who mentioned the authors’ use of covert participant observation had qualms about it. Festinger and his collaborators had included an Appendix on participant observation, but that did not prevent four reviewers from expressing concern that the researching observers, who made up a third of the flying-saucer group at the critical moment when the principal prophecy failed, might have influenced the way the group reacted to the failure. Three reviewers were troubled by the fact that the authors had nothing to say about the ethical issues that covert participant observation raised with respect to the validity of the study. M. Brewster Smith (1957: 89–92), in a long lead article in *Contemporary Psychology*, concluded his essay with a carefully crafted discussion of this concern. Since then, these kinds of ethical issues have received a great deal of attention.

My big surprise was the lack of enthusiasm the reviewers had for the theory of cognitive dissonance. No one found it provocative or predicted that it would inaugurate a new program of research. Three reviewers failed to mention the theory or its famous hypothesis that group members would increase their proselytizing efforts in response to failed prophecy. Lewis M. Killian (1957: 236–37), writing in the *American Sociological Review*, and Sylvester A. Sieber, writing in the *American Catholic Sociological Review* (1956: 365–66), agreed with the authors that the hypothesis had been supported. They summarized the theory’s five points but made no comment on them. Neither did Everett C. Hughes, who wrote in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Hughes (1958: 437–38) had “no special quarrel” with evidence that the hypothesis had been supported, but he questioned the authors’ contention that the group “might have taken on new life and growth” had a series of unforeseen events not put an end to its existence.

Other reviewers were skeptical of the theory itself. J.H. Robb (1957: 297–99), writing in *The Sociological Review*, was not impressed by cognitive dissonance theory and found the book “scientifically somewhat disappointing,” though he did not say why. Smith (1957: 89–92), despite praising the book as “remarkable” and “no routine research report,” also found fault with its theoretical component. In his opinion, cognitive dissonance theory is “only sketchily summarized” and the hypothesis “can hardly be considered proved.” Moreover, he could not discover a

necessary logical relationship between cognitive dissonance theory and the proselytization hypothesis. In his view, the latter appears to be “only loosely derived from” the former.

Writing in the *British Journal of Psychology*, A.J.M. Flook (1957: 157) went further. He suspected that the “so-called hypothesis” was actually “based largely on the inductive generalizations” the authors made after reviewing the history of Western millenarian movements. He did not criticize cognitive dissonance theory itself, but he was puzzled that the authors “concede” that failure of a prophecy sometimes leads to a movement’s collapse. Yet Festinger *et al.* make no attempt to reconcile “this damaging admission” with their theoretical model. This is a “sandwich-type book,” he concluded, “the narrative forming the generous portion of meat between thin slices of scientific bread.”

### *Re-Reading When Prophecy Fails*

I was so intrigued by the reviewers’ reservations about the book’s shortcomings that I decided to make my own appraisal of it. It had been such a long time since I’d read *When Prophecy Fails* that its fine points had escaped me. All that was left was a vague recollection of what I took to be its highlights. So I read it again.

I focused my attention on the authors’ theoretical model and its relation to the historical and observational material they provide. The famous theory consists of five conditions for expecting individuals to increase proselytizing activity following a disconfirmed belief. These conditions are (1) their deep conviction that the belief is true, (2) their commitment to the belief in the form of action that is hard to undo, (3) the falsifiability of the belief, (4) the believers’ recognition that it has been disconfirmed, and (5) the existence among them of a strong network of social support. When these conditions are met, the authors (Festinger *et al.* 1956: 4) write, “We would expect the belief to be maintained and the believers to attempt to proselyte or to persuade nonmembers that the belief is correct.”

It quickly became clear that the model contains a conceptual difficulty that leads to absurd predictions about the message that believers will proclaim after a prophecy has failed. Consider the case of the Millerites, the nineteenth-century followers of the American preacher William Miller, who expected the Lord’s return to earth on October 22, 1844. According to a strict reading of the authors’ model, after the prophecy was dis-

confirmed, the only message the followers could give to prospective converts was an affirmation of the original “belief,” namely that the Lord will return on October 22, 1844. That is ridiculous, but it is the prediction the model yields when it describes renewed proselytizing as an attempt “to persuade nonmembers that the belief is correct.”

This formal blunder is a minor part of a more serious shortcoming. The model’s treatment of belief as consisting solely of the prophecy itself obscures the fact that prophecies are invariably embedded within a larger matrix of cognitive elements that cohere in the minds of the followers. The prophecy may be the focal point of their attention, but the followers have an array of other cognitive resources to draw upon in coping with the disappointment that its failure produces. Another shortcoming of the model is its tacit assumption that when its conditions are met, the proselytizing response is automatic. Nothing in the model addresses the part that thought, reflection, and the exchange of ideas play in the framing of the response to failure. In short, no attention is given to the *cognitive work* in which followers engage when prophecy fails. It is strange that a model of cognitive dissonance has nothing to say about cognition other than to pose the existence of a shared belief that a prophecy will be fulfilled. Perhaps a sense that the model had these shortcomings was one reason no reviewer expressed enthusiasm for it.

Flook (1957: 157) was right that *When Prophecy Fails* offers “thin slices of scientific bread,” but he was also right that sandwiched between these slices is a narrative that provides a “generous portion of meat.” The narrative consists of the authors’ review of some famous examples of failed prophecies and a lengthy and readable account of their experiences with the flying-saucer cult. As I reread this material, I realized that the authors did in fact recognize that prophetic movements have more than one belief, that the response to prophetic failure stimulates renewed cognitive work, and that stepped-up efforts to proselytize are not the only response to failure. The trouble is that these recognitions form no part of their theoretical model. In fact, they are so casually scattered throughout the narrative that the reader may not bother to ask whether they are consistent with the model’s assumptions.

Judging from the narrative, Festinger and his colleagues knew, for example, that Sabbatai Zevi’s seventeenth-century messianic movement made no sense apart from the rich and complex tradition of Jewish prophecy, that William Miller’s nineteenth-century movement imported a heavy load of cognitive baggage from the prophetic wing of Anglo-American Protestantism, and that their twentieth-century flying-saucer

cult's prophecy would have made little sense apart from the assumption that flying saucers from other worlds existed. To wit, the saucers were operated by benign beings who sent messages to the cult's leaders, and that a great earthly cataclysm was imminent.

As Flook pointed out, Festinger and his colleagues were also aware that some prophetic failures were so demoralizing that the movement disintegrates or is reduced to a small remnant of believers. Festinger *et al.* (1956: 22–23) reported that the messianic movement of Sabbatai Zevi (also spelled Sevi), collapsed after his astonishing conversion to Islam, and that the “disconfirmation of October 22 [1844] ... brought about the collapse of Millerism,” a movement that “virtually disappeared” within six or seven months. According to Festinger *et al.* (1956: 21–22), these particular disconfirmations proved “too much” for the believers’ coping skills. What makes a disconfirmation “too much” for followers to bear? The authors suggest, in passing, that it might be a disconfirmation coming on the heels of a series of previous disappointments that were largely overcome, but they do not pursue the theoretical implications of this interesting possibility. Flook (1957: 157) is right, then, to regard the authors’ treatment of these two cases as a “damaging admission.” And it is not surprising that investigations of other cases of failed prophecy have seldom confirmed Festinger *et als.*’ proselytization hypothesis (Stone, 2000).

It is true that the collapse of these movements did not put an end to messianic or adventist speculations. A small remnant of Zevi’s followers remained loyal for years to come. Some of Miller’s followers soon rallied around the founders of Seventh-day Adventism. But in neither case was the message proclaimed exactly the same as it had been before the trauma of disconfirmation. Zevi’s followers went to elaborate lengths to interpret his conversion as part of his messianic mission—an interpretation, however, that mostly fell on deaf ears (see Scholem 1973). The message proclaimed by Mary Ellen White, the founder of Seventh-day Adventism, proved much more popular, but it was substantially different from Miller’s. In other words, in response to disappointment, innovative cognitive work has to be done if anything is to be salvaged of the movement. Disappointments may vary in how devastating they are to a movement’s teachings and how difficult it is to devise an interpretation that appeals to previous followers or prospective converts. It proved much harder to interpret Zevi’s embracing Islam in the context of Jewish messianic teaching than it did to interpret the failure of Miller’s prophecy within the framework of Anglo-Protestant millennialism.

Although cognitive work plays no part in their formal model, Festinger *et al.*'s narrative account richly documents its existence. In particular, there was a flurry of cognitive work in the flying-saucer group when it became apparent that the prophesied midnight visit of spacemen on December 21 was not going to happen. At about five minutes past midnight, the "Creator," one of the group's two members who claimed to be in touch with the spacemen, assured everyone that there had been only "a slight delay." But as time went by, and it became clear that the delay was not slight, he "began to talk again, haltingly and disconnectedly," clearly struggling to devise an explanation of the delay that would not call the group's larger beliefs into question. Around half-past twelve, he declared that a miracle "would be wrought that very night." As he "droned on," the Creator "gradually developed the point" that the miracle consisted of the death and resurrection of the unbelieving husband of Mrs. Keech, the other person in the group who was in touch with the spacemen. On three occasions group members went upstairs, where Mr. Keech was sleeping, to see whether he had died. But on each occasion, they found him alive and asleep (Festinger *et al.* 1956: 163).

The Creator's next piece of cognitive work was to declare that Mr. Keech had already died and been resurrected. Festinger *et al.* (1956: 164) report that this "solution was so inadequate . . . that even the authority of the Creator could not gain acceptance for it. It was quickly buried in silence." The Creator then engaged in yet another round of cognitive work. He declared that "the death and resurrection of Mr. Keech referred to a purely spiritual matter." Although the group seemed to accept this explanation, "the topic of the miracle was dropped." If this death and resurrection had been the centerpiece of the group's prophetic hope, spiritualizing its failure might have come as a great relief to all. As it was, however, the prophecy was *ad hoc*, no one had an investment in it, and its failure was too trivial for the members to worry about.

After the Creator's conjectures had fallen flat and those of others had led nowhere, Mrs. Keech eventually came up with an interpretation that almost everyone accepted joyously. She had received a message that was plausible and elegant. The faithfulness and vigilance of her group had managed to prevent the great cataclysm that was to have doomed Earth after the spacemen rescued her flock. She urged that the press be informed of this wonderful news and that her followers spread it as well.

Edward Berryman (2003: 421), writing many years later, was right to claim that "Mrs. Keech's prophecy did not fail—it was canceled!" I suspect that Mrs. Keech could have devised a plausible explanation for



the failed prophecy that would not have involved spreading the word. As research has shown, there are a wide variety of ways that groups resolve the question of why a prophecy has failed. (Stone 2001, Tumminia 2005).

### *Rationalization Versus Truth*

In those few passages in which Festinger *et al.* (1956: 28) give a name to the conjectures and discursive processes of cognitive work, they refer to them as *rationalizations*. This term, long used by psychoanalysts and clinical psychologists and now part of the vocabulary of the educated public, was given its modern meaning by Anna Freud in her famous book, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (1938). Rationalization is a cognitive mechanism that people use to protect themselves against anxiety and loss of self-esteem by offering seemingly rational and logical explanations for their behavior in order to avoid accepting the bitter truth. In short, rationalization is a way to evade reality.

A few later critics have taken the authors of *When Prophecy Fails* to task for referring to the cognitive work of the flying-saucer cult as rationalizations. Anthony B. Van Fossen, for example, objects to the assumption of epistemological superiority that the term implies. Thus, Van Fossen writes (2000: 176–77) “Festinger assumes that there is a real world against which prophecies are measured . . . For him, a prophetic movement is a folly, an anomaly butting up against the real world” and the flying-saucer cult members are “recognizable fools.” The “millennialists are the primitives and the social scientists, the guardians of reality.”

Berryman (2003: 421), after emphasizing the variety of ways that groups respond to failed prophecies, also complains that Festinger and his associates treat the discourse in which believers engage to shape these responses as “the mere expression of their incapacity to grasp reality properly.” The authors assume uncritically that as social scientists, they are “not the bearers of one viewpoint among others, but have the right grasp of reality.” In short, they play the role of omniscient observers.

These complaints are well founded. Not only do Festinger *et al.* have no theoretical interest in the cognitive work of their subjects, except insofar as it might trigger the proselytization response; when they do describe it, they refer to it as a set of rationalizations. An assumption of cognitive superiority certainly undergirds their account, and Van Fossen

and Berryman are justified to point it out and grumble. But the complaint is a trivial one in this case. Who, aside from the small handful of flying saucer cultists, believed in their prophecy in the first place? Virtually everyone else, from the most hardened secularist to the most pious Christian or orthodox Muslim would share Festinger's tacit assumption that the cultists were gullible and misinformed. Few critics, except those unusually alert to epistemological issues, would find fault with calling the cultists' cognitive work acts of delusion.

Though trivial in this instance, Van Fossen's and Berryman's complaint is not trivial in all cases. What if a failed prophecy happens outside the realm of a small religious cult? What if a "rationalization" for a failure is believed by a multitude of people? What if the belief system involved is a secular ideology, such as Marxism or free-market capitalism? What if it is a purportedly scientific theory? Would an outside observer be justified in dismissing as rationalizations all attempts to reinterpret a failed prediction or other disappointment without abandoning the theoretical system from which it was derived? As I surveyed the early reviews of *When Prophecy Fails*, I discovered that one scholar had obliquely raised this question in 1958. He is the only one who raised it at the time, and so far as I know, he is the only critic of that book and the research program it has inspired who has ever raised it.

The critic was the social psychologist Robert W. White, then at Harvard University. His treatment of the book, which appeared in *The American Psychologist* in 1958, was not a conventional review but rather a satire that the editor published as a "comment." Writing with tongue in cheek, White (1958: 656–57) reported that "*When Prophecy Fails* deals with a prophecy made by Festinger . . . , who undertook to foretell how a certain group of people would behave under certain circumstances; and their prophecy proved to be correct.... On the whole," therefore, "the book must be accounted a victory for prophecy." In other words, a prophecy belongs to the same class of predictions as a scientific hypothesis, at least insofar as both are predictions about observable events.

White then introduces Hoyst O. Petard, a fictitious professor of psychology at West Dakota University, who tries to replicate Festinger's research results. Alas, the proselytizing hypothesis is not confirmed even though the group he studied met all five conditions of Festinger's theoretical model. So the "prophecy" fails. Professor Petard, however, responds to the failure the same way Mrs. Keech and her followers did. After pondering the results, he writes that "it is clear that some new factor entered the situation and thus obscured the operation of the law of increased

proselytizing.” What new factor could that be? Perhaps social class was not properly controlled, or perhaps the wrong index of proselytization was used. Or maybe he should have used projective tests.

The professor then proceeds to the next step, which involves his own proselytizing. First, Petard White says, “The problem clearly needs further research.” He successfully applies for grants and others join him in his various projects. He soon launches a new journal called *Social Prediction*, and before long he helps found a new section of the American Psychological Association called the Division of Social Determinism. He is elected its first president. And finally, White writes, as Professor Petard “listens to its papers and panel presentations, his heart is warmed by the repeated assurance that in the realm of group behavior, not now, not tomorrow, but in some heavenly future of methodological sophistication, prophecy need never fail.”

White wrote facetiously, of course, and his comment drew no epistemological conclusions, but it seems obvious that he would not have written this essay if he had not been aware that the interpretational process in which the flying-saucer cult engaged, that Festinger *et al.* called *rationalization*, occurs in science too. And he was surely also aware that it is sometimes hard to determine whose assessment of the outcome of this process is correct, the view of those who accept it or the view of those who are skeptical. Was Professor Petard a fool to keep pursuing the proselytization hypothesis by tweaking it a bit? Or was he on the road to solid knowledge? In cases such as this, which are ubiquitous in the sciences, there may be no such thing as an omniscient observer, at least not in the short run.

Festinger and his collaborators did not mean to raise the deep and perplexing epistemological issue of how to assess the rationality of cognitive responses to the failure of expectations that are couched within a system of governing ideas. But in dismissing their cultists’ cognitive work as a species of rationalization, they unwittingly took a stand on it.

What the researchers wanted to do was give credence to the hypothesis that renewed proselytizing is the expected response to a failure of religious prophecy. In the short run, the hypothesis seemed intriguingly plausible. But the research it inspired has yielded such a variety of outcomes that investigators no longer have faith in it. It now makes sense to wonder whether the authors would have served social science better by using their richly detailed field observations to conceptualize the complex process of cognitive work their cult members did in assessing the meaning of the belief-related events that unfolded in the course of the

fieldwork. Even so, the early reviewers of *When Prophecy Fails* were right to call it an “excellent job of reporting,” an “exciting, often astounding narrative.” And for those virtues alone, it is still worth reading.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### WHERE PROPHECY LIVES: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

RALPH W. HOOD, JR.

The *Annual Review of Psychology* has published only two reviews of the psychology of religion, one by Richard L. Gorsuch (1988) and the other by Robert A. Emmons and Raymond F. Paloutzian (2003). Neither review dealt with the theory of cognitive dissonance in general or with studies of failed prophecy in particular. Yet given the prevalence of the discussion of cognitive dissonance and failed prophecy in textbooks on the social psychology of religion (Batson *et al.* 1993, Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997, Spilka *et al.* 2003), one might reasonably ask, "Where is prophecy in the reviews of contemporary psychology of religion?"

As is traditional, both of these *Annual Reviews* focused upon empirical research, yet the nature of each review, separated by 15 years, is strikingly different. Each proposed a paradigm for the psychology of religion. The first review emphasized measurement and correlational studies, while the second stressed the importance of experimental research. This shift marks the psychology of religion courting mainstream privileged methodologies of American social psychology on areas and topics funded by foundations, most of which can be traced back to Templeton money. Undisputedly, it is largely the influence of the Templeton Foundation that is driving the choice of topics and experimental emphasis in contemporary psychology of religion (Wulff 2003).

In the decade prior to Gorsuch's identification of a measurement paradigm (1984, 1988), Donald Capps *et al.* (1976), noted that out of a total of almost 2,800 articles to that date in the psychology of religion only 150 were empirical studies. Of these, 90% were correlational. Dittes (1985) noted the same dominance of correlational studies in the only review chapter on the psychology of religion to appear in the *Handbook of Social Psychology*, which has gone through four editions with only the second carrying a chapter on religion. The Emmons and Paloutzian review does not abandon the measurement/correlational

paradigm noted earlier by Dittes and Capps *et al.*, but simply embeds these correlational and measurement studies in research methods exhibiting the characteristic of mainstream psychology. The new trend in psychology of religion is decidedly experimental, following the same trend that cognitive dissonance theory has taken (Harmon-Jones and Mills 1999, Jones 1998). This shift best identifies the gold standard according to which it has long been argued empirical psychology of religion ought to aspire (Batson 1977, 1979). Persons trained in experimental research (typically social or personality psychologists) do much of the current empirical research in American psychology of religion. Not surprisingly, then, the theme that dominates is research modeled after what is acceptable to the flagship journal in American social psychology, *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (JPSP).

This chapter considers the idealized experimental paradigm in order to contrast empirical findings concerning Festinger's theory that has been so successful in laboratory studies with field studies in which its success has not been matched. Not surprisingly, these differences make for rather extreme evaluations of cognitive dissonance theory. For instance, Edward E. Jones (1998: x) acknowledges cognitive dissonance as "the most important development in social psychology to date." However, the social psychology to which Jones refers is psychological social psychology located in the laboratories of American universities. Conclusions differ if we step outside the laboratory. Here, cognitive dissonance and Festinger's now classic study of the prophetic flying-saucer group depicted in *When Prophecy Fails* has been judged "a radically deficient guide" for research in failed prophecy (Van Fossen 1988: 194). Different conclusions regarding the theory of cognitive dissonance and its value for understanding failed prophecy stem from different methods employed by two radically different versions of social psychology located in two very different places (Hood and Belzen 2005, Spilka *et al.* 2003). As with the value of real estate, what most often matters are three things: location, location, and location.

*From Social Psychologies to Social Psychology:  
The Experimental Paradigm*

Emmons and Paloutzian call for a *new multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm* (2003: 395 [emphasis in the original]) accompanied by the assertion of the value of using data at multiple levels of analysis, as well as the

value of non-reductive assumptions regarding the nature of religious and spiritual phenomena. The call for this new paradigm is echoed again in the *Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality* (Park and Paloutzian 2003). However, as we shall see, this call is not at all represented by the empirical research in the Emmons and Paloutzian (2003) review, nor has it been heard in the area of research we are considering here, the effects of failed prophecy. There are at least two distinct literatures (perhaps three, if we count historical studies) dealing with failed (or apparently failed) prophecy. Furthermore it is the reluctance to consider interdisciplinary paradigms that leads to markedly different conclusions: when and where does prophecy fail, in the laboratory or in the world at large? Before we look at the failure to have an interdisciplinary view in prophecy research, we will briefly look at the failure of interdisciplinary programs in social psychology in general.

#### *History of Previous Interdisciplinary Efforts in Social Psychology*

The history of interdisciplinary paradigms in American psychology suggests that, in terms of methodology, experimental paradigms trump all others. Jones (1998: 4) reminds us that Harvard's Department of Social Relations established in 1946 as an interdisciplinary department (clinical psychology, cultural anthropology, sociology, and social psychology) is now but a "concession to nostalgia." Other interdisciplinary efforts such as the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research have, as Jones (1998: 4) also reminds us, had more to do with funding and space than "intellectual convergence." Sheldon Stryker (1997) has identified two social psychologies: psychological social psychology (PSP), emphasizing quantitative experimental methods, and sociological social psychology (SSP), emphasizing qualitative methods, such as symbolic interaction and ethnomethodology. James S. House (1977) identifies a third SSP that is quantitative but focused upon data derived from survey research rather than experimentation. This would make for four social psychologies, if the historical studies alluded to above are also acknowledged.

Efforts to create a specifically interdisciplinary social psychology have a poor history, as the interdisciplinary efforts noted above indicate. One of the most widely adopted social psychology textbooks of the 1960s teamed psychologist Paul F. Secord and sociologist Carl W. Backman. They tried to create an interdisciplinary social psychology and claimed that "social psychology can no longer be adequately surveyed by a person trained in only one of its parent disciplines" (1964: vii). However, both



*Annual Reviews* discussed above attest to the fact that even within social psychology the literatures of one social psychology seldom reference the other. Furthermore, it is worth noting that when the criticisms of laboratory-based research were more intense by sociologically-oriented social psychologists (in the decades of the '60s and '70s), the percent of experimental studies in *JPSP* increased (Moghaddam *et al.* 1993: 26). Thus, psychological social psychology has become a unitary sub-discipline of psychology with a singular ideal methodology, the laboratory experiment, despite telling conceptual criticisms of the limits of a laboratory-based psychology (Belzen and Hood 2006, Hood and Belzen 2005).

In reviewing the history of social psychology, Gordon W. Allport noted that not only had it become a subdiscipline of general psychology, but by defining the laboratory-based experiment as the gold standard, what we identify as psychological social psychology has the obvious disadvantage that it can seldom generalize beyond the laboratory setting. In Allport's (1968: 68) words: "Even if the experiment is successfully repeated there is no proof that the discovery has wider validity. It is for this reason that some current investigations seem to end up in elegantly polished triviality—snippets of empiricism, but nothing more." The gap between psychologically-oriented and sociologically-oriented social psychologies is one of location determined by differing research methods. The success of laboratory studies of cognitive dissonance is not repeated in field studies. As we shall see, prophecy seldom fails in the world of lived experience, and only artificially imagined failures of prophecies are studied in the laboratory.

### *The Experimental Paradigm as Ideal*

Psychologically-oriented social psychologists applaud the experiment as the single best source of legitimate scientific data. Aronson, Wilson and Brewer (1998: 118–24) identify four steps to the true experiment: (1) setting the stage for the experiment, (2) constructing an independent variable, (3) measuring the dependent variable, and (4) planning the post-experimental follow-up. Included in the follow-up is a concern that the "cover story" of the experiment was accepted by the participants, since many experiments utilize deception.

Deception, while guided by APA ethical codes and University IRB boards, nevertheless raises serious ethical issues (Kelman 1967, 1968). Laboratory social psychology is almost totally deception-based, and as

we will note, this became a concern in laboratory-based dissonance research. When deception is extended to fieldwork, it arguably raises even more serious ethical issues. James T. Richardson (1991) noted this with *When Prophecy Fails*, and Hood (1995) raised similar concerns with Dennis Covington's *Salvation on Sand Mountain* (1995) in respect to deceptive participatory research with the contemporary serpent handlers of Appalachia. Likewise, Jones (1985) wrote that ethical concerns with increasingly deceptive laboratory experiments attempting to induce cognitive dissonance was a factor in the eventual waning of interest in laboratory studies. Ironically, Festinger acknowledged that the type of laboratory research that he and his colleagues did in "the good old days" would be unlikely to be allowed today. As he (1999: 384–85) succinctly stated the case, "I don't know how we would have gotten anything through ethics committees."

An early proponent (Batson 1977: 41) of experimentation in psychology of religion proclaimed, "Although an experimental psychology of religion does not exist, one seems badly needed." However, he recognized that a true experimental design requires random assignment of participants to experimental and control conditions. This is not possible using religious variables if for no other than ethical reasons. This is not unique to the psychology of religion. In his presidential address to the APA, Donald T. Campbell (1975: 1193) noted that "in some areas we are unable to experiment." If one is precluded from random assignment of participants to groups, one can still do quasi-experimental designs (Campbell and Stanley 1966, Deconchy 1985). Quasi-experimental designs (Aronson *et al.* 1998: 129) can be done both in the laboratory and the field, fulfilling most of the requirements of internal validity regarded as the "*sine qua non* of good experimental research." Criticisms that experimental and quasi-experimental designs often lack external validity (the ability to generalize to non-experimental settings) are no longer prominent among psychologically-oriented social psychologists, but are often raised by sociologically-oriented social psychologists whose research occurs in a real world context. As laboratory-oriented experiments confront "realism," there is a radical shift in the meaning of the term.

### *Laboratory-Based Realisms*

Aronson and his colleagues have taken the lead in identifying three basic kinds of realism, all of which we subsume under the term *contextual realism*: mundane, experimental, and psychological realism. Mundane

realism is the extent to which the experimental task is similar to one that occurs in everyday life, while experimental realism is the extent to which participants take the experiment seriously (Aronson and Carlsmith 1968). Psychological realism is the extent to which the processes that occur in the experimental situation are the same as those that occur in everyday life (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 1994). Contextual realism is equally relevant to both experimental and quasi-experimental designs. Our largely conceptual discussion of experimental examples on “failed prophecy” will compare results obtained from experimental and quasi-experimental designs with results obtained from different methodologies that yield contrary results. After all, it must be remembered that Festinger developed his theory of cognitive dissonance as part of the focus on consistency theories in psychological social psychology beginning in the late 1950s, and applied it to failed prophecy only as a fortuitous opportunity arose to test his then developing theory in a natural field setting (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997: 48). As we shall see, after *When Prophecy Fails* was published, neither Festinger nor many psychological social psychologists continued to apply dissonance theory to religion in general or to failed prophecy in particular.

There is a reason for this, and it is simply that the remarkable achievements in terms of research productivity on cognitive dissonance occurred in experimental laboratories across America where neither dissonance nor prophecy could fail. Again, it is Festinger who provides the irony for this turn to the laboratory. Late in his career he acknowledged his own lack of activity with respect to laboratory studies of dissonance theory and his leaving social psychology. His terse explanation was: “I left and stopped doing research on the theory of cognitive dissonance because I was in a total rut. The only thing I could think about was how correct the original statement had been” (Festinger 1999: 383).

### *Cognitive Dissonance: A Brief Look at the Theory*

Cognitive dissonance, first formally proposed by Festinger (1957), was being modified during his famous field study of the group that predicted the end of the world. This theory has been so successful in psychological social psychology that just four years before Festinger’s death, Jones (1985: 57) claimed, “Because the main propositions of dissonance theory have been confirmed with sufficient regularity, there is not a great deal to be gained from further research in this area.” In an obituary for Leon

Festinger in the *American Psychologist*, the renowned social psychologist R.B. Zajonc (1990: 661) said, “Leon is to social psychology what Freud is to clinical psychology and Piaget is to developmental psychology.” Clearly, Zajonc was referencing psychological social psychology. In a statement surely more hyperbole than descriptive truth, Zajonc credits Festinger with developing a research style that likened him to Picasso and Dostoyevsky.

Basic to Festinger’s theory is that cognitions more or less map reality. Hence, there is pressure for individual beliefs to congruent with reality—whether physical, psychological, or sociological (Festinger 1957: 10–11). This has led some researchers to puzzle over how it is that individuals can maintain membership in religious groups when they make predictions that are falsified. The classic *When Prophecy Fails* recounts the participant observation study of a psychic flying-saucer group that predicted the end of the world, which provided a fortuitous opportunity to test a belief Festinger and his team were sure would be falsified. In light of the general focus on consistency in psychological social psychology, it was assumed that a clearly falsified prophecy would produce an objectively identified state of dissonance (a disjuncture between belief and circumstance) that would motivate the believers both to increase their commitment to their beliefs and also seek to increase proselytization.

Hence, the interest in prophecy was simply a concern with disconfirmed belief in a real-life setting and not any genuine interest in psychology of religion *per se* by dissonance theorists. Festinger also took a hand at some historical speculations on unfulfilled prophecies and disappointing messiahs. Part of the appeal of the theory of cognitive dissonance has always been in its counterintuitive hypotheses: (1) beliefs that are clearly falsified will be held even more intensely after falsification, and (2) groups will increase active proselytization. As we shall see, the former hypothesis has been supported by laboratory studies, while the latter has seldom been supported in field studies (Wicklund and Brehm 1974, Harmon-Jones and Mill 1999, Stone 2000, Spilka *et al.* 2003, Hood and Belzen 2005).

Festinger’s claim to have identified the consequences of failed prophecy has been applied to many historical examples of failed prophecy such as the Montanists, Millerites, and even Christianity itself. For instance, it is claimed that the second century failure of Montanus to predict the return of Jesus led to renewed commitment and the success of the Montanists (Hughes 1954: 10). Also William Miller’s mid-nineteenth century prediction of the end of the world never materialized, yet the

Millerites prospered as a consequence (so we are to believe) of their failed prophecy (Sears 1924). Perhaps most dramatic is the interpretation that Christianity itself succeeded based largely upon the failed prediction of Christ's second coming (Wernick 1975). While Festinger is cautious only to suggest that historical examples of failed prophecy can be explained by cognitive dissonance, specific historical studies of biblical prophetic traditions have modified considerably Festinger's claims, particularly the ability to identify actual failed prophecies objectively (Carroll 1979). The Achilles heel of the theory appears when it is placed in real-life contexts. Nevertheless, psychologically oriented social psychologists continue to interpret dissonant beliefs objectively, offering even quasi-experimental studies as support for Festinger's basic theory (Batson 1975). Thus, psychologically oriented social psychologists have tended to see in Festinger's theory a classic model of theory construction that allows specific empirical tests, largely supportive of the theory. When Jones (1998: 69) wrote a summary of cognitive dissonance theory, he noticed that there were in excess of 1200 experimental, laboratory-based studies and that the basic theory was so strongly supported that little additional research was needed. However, sociologically oriented social psychologists have argued quite the opposite from a location outside the laboratory.

### *Sociological Studies of Failed Prophecies*

Sociologically-oriented social psychologists have found major flaws in cognitive dissonance interpretations of failed prophecy. *When Prophecy Fails* has been faulted on methodological grounds. William Sims Bainbridge (1977) noted that often almost one-third of the membership consisted of participant observers, and that the media continually badgered the group to account for its commitment. Thus, the increased proselytizing and affirmations of faith may have been influenced by media pressure. Others have noted that Festinger's interpretation of historic cases in light of dissonance theory is flawed. For instance, J. Gordon Melton has argued that the Millerites were not simply focused upon the prophecy, and they did not disband in the manner Festinger claimed in order to provide support for his theory. Melton (1985: 20) further notes that "within religious groups prophecy seldom fails." Likewise, Anthony B. Van Fossen (1988) pointed out that despite the continual citation of *When Prophecy Fails*, it provides a deficient guide to the study of prophetic groups. Finally,

after a critical review, Chris Bader (1999: 120) concludes, “[N]o study of a failed prophecy, the current research included, has provided support for the cognitive dissonance hypothesis.”

How can the sociologically oriented social psychologists have such a different evaluation of dissonance theory in respect to prophecy? The answer is largely methodological. Psychologists typically take an outsider perspective and assume they can identify dissonant beliefs by objective criteria. Thus, the experimenter is the ultimate authority to identify “unequivocal and undeniable” disconfirmation of a prophecy (Festinger *et al.* 1956: 3). Yet, as Coyle (2001: 150) notes the term “religious gap” has become common with reference to the difference that exists between social science professionals and the general population regarding religious beliefs. It is this fact that largely explains why psychologically oriented social psychologists fail to acknowledge what sociologically oriented social psychologists consistently document: prophecy seldom fails in the real world. It is largely this distancing from beliefs far distant from one’s own that leads social scientists astray when they claim to have laboratory-mediated access to the cognitive process of their believing subjects (Hill *et al.* 2005).

The religious gap hypothesis is relevant when a researcher claims to interpret when beliefs are dissonant and when prophecy has failed. This is crucial, since Festinger’s theory requires that beliefs be proved false. In the authors’ exact words, the evidence is “unequivocal and undeniable” (Festinger *et al.* 1956: 3). Such an objectivist stance is naïve with respect to how beliefs actually operate in real life contexts. As Carroll (1979: 184), commented when applying cognitive dissonance theory to biblical prophecy, there are no simple objective criteria by which one can identify failed prophecy. What outsiders, especially researchers, see as failed prophecy is seldom seen that way by insiders. Sociologist Diana Tumminia (1998: 165) observes, “What appears to be seemingly irrefutable evidence of irreconcilable contradictions to outsiders, like Festinger, can instead be evidence of the truth of prophecy to insiders.” Carroll further notes that among believers there is a transcendental dimension to prophecy that secures it from what is only an apparent failure. Sociologically oriented social psychologists emphasize this, recognizing that failed prophecy entails hermeneutical considerations that make claims to “unequivocal and undeniable” falsification perpetually problematic.

Sociologically oriented social psychologists have tended to take an insider’s perspective and to focus upon interpersonal processes that

maintain a socially constructed reality incapable of any simple falsification. "Failed prophecy" is thus a socially negotiated term and depends upon negotiated claims to reality and for meaning (Berger and Luckmann 1967, Carroll 1979, Pollner 1987, Hood *et al.* 2003). Furthermore, among prophetic groups, prophecy is less central than outsiders assume. The exclusive focus upon prophecy leads outsiders to assume that the major concern of the group is prophecy and ignores the complex cosmology that serves to integrate the group (Melton 1985). Participant observation studies of prophetic groups have begun to show how rare increased proselytization is as a reaction to what is only apparently failed prophecy (Stone 2000). Zygmunt defines prophecy as a prediction that a "drastic transformation of the existing social order will occur in the proximate future through the intervention of some supernatural agency" (1972: 245). The recognition of the transformation is socially constructed, hence may not be capable of unequivocal and undeniable failure. Thus, from the insider's perspective, prophecy cannot fail. Even apparently material failures of prophecy can be construed as spiritual successes.

The denial of the failure of prophecy is the most common response from within prophetic groups, as members struggle to stay within the group and to seek a proper interpretation of what must be only an apparent failure (Carroll 1979, Melton 1985, Dein 1997, 2001, Tuminia 1998, 2005). Increased proselytization is actually an uncommon response, according to Jon R. Stone (2000). As Simon Dein (2001) explains, dissonance theory too often is utilized to persuade others that those who stay within prophetic groups are irrational and driven by forces they do not understand. Such claims are possible only when the researcher assumes an objectivist stance and can claim that in fact prophecy has failed. However, researchers who adopt the perspective of the insider avoid committing what William James (1899/1981) identified as the psychological fallacy—to assume that others must experience the world as psychologists do. The task is to understand how believers confront a more spiritual understanding of prophecy than a simple literal understanding of its failure (Carroll 1979, Dein 2001).

For instance, Lorne Dawson (1999) states that increased proselytization is only one way to decrease dissonance and not at all a common way in the face of failed prophecy. The denial that prophecy has failed is more common than increased proselytization (Zygmunt 1972). As noted above, denial can take the form of spiritualization, a reinterpretation of the prophecy so that it has been fulfilled. For instance, Bainbridge (1997: 98) remarks that when Charles Taze Russell of the Jeho-

vah's Witnesses apparently failed to predict Christ's return in 1874 he argued that Christ had indeed returned invisibly. Likewise, Tumminia (2005), who conducted a participant observation study of the Unarius Academy of Science in El Cajon, California, heard the same rationalization for the failed 2001 prophecy of spaceships landing. More consistently though, since Unarius experienced several failed prophecies before that time, members reinterpreted the disconfirmations in terms of reincarnation and the reliving of past lives. Their failed prophecies were usually experienced as spiritually fulfilled events within the group's worldview Tumminia (1998, 2005).

Both historical and contemporary participant observation studies of diverse prophetic groups, such as the Baha'i sect (Balch *et al.* 1983), a Mormon sect called the Morrisites (Halford *et al.* 1981), and a contemporary Lubavitch Hasidic sect (Dein 1997, 2001) reveal that members continue to struggle with their beliefs, and membership within groups can become disillusioned—they sometimes leave groups, but still rationally struggle with the meaning of prophecies that become not simply false, but problematic. One common interpretation is that failed prophecies are a test of faith (Hardyck and Braden 1962, Tumminia 1998). However, from an insider's perspective the struggle is always rational and meaningful. Stemming from his research on Lubavitch, Dein (2001: 399) writes that individuals within prophetic groups "are not a group of fanatics who follow doctrine without question. They are sane people trying to reason their way through facts and doctrine in the pursuit of understanding."

Dein's recognition of the believer's struggle for understanding problematic events is carefully documented in Scholem's (1973) masterful study of Sabbatai Zevi, the Jewish messianic prophet of the mid-seventeenth century. His study has been popularized in Armstrong's (2000: 26–31) history of fundamentalism. As one of the earliest messianic movements within the context of Lurianic Kabbalism, Sabbatai declared himself Messiah on May 28, 1665. His popularity spread widely as people learned of his counterintuitive actions to restore the unity of Godhead. These acts of *tikkun* (restoration) include violating the laws of the *Torah*, eating non-kosher food, and publicly speaking the forbidden name of God. As Sabbatai's acts of *tikkun* became more famous, such as his wearing of royal Messiah robes in a synagogue, he was arrested and taken to Istanbul. He was given the option of death or conversion to Islam. He chose the latter, and thus he created a problem for those who had accepted him as the Messiah. The apparent failure of prophecy (an apostate Messiah) followed by Sabbatai's death in 1676 would appear to an



outsider as solid disconfirmation. Of course, Sabbatai's conversion and subsequent death remained unproblematic for believing Jews who never accepted his claim to be the Messiah. However, for his followers, including the Lurianic Kabbalist Nathan of Gaza, who had received a revelation that Sabbatai would be Savior and who was heavily influential in Sabbatai's acceptance by many Jews, the struggle ensued. Briefly, two negotiated understandings by believers continued to affirm that Sabbatai was the real Messiah: first when he converted to Islam and second when he died without the Jews being redeemed.

With respect to Sabbatai's conversion to Islam, both Armstrong (2000: 29) and Scholem (1973: 800–01) cite at least three ways in which followers understood Sabbatai's conversion as congruent with his claim of being the Messiah. One, attributed to Nathan of Gaza, was that God had been forced to descend further into the realm of exile and take the form of evil itself. This was the ultimate act of *tikkun*. Sabbatai, it was said, secretly remained committed to Judaism while overtly conforming to Islam. Other followers who continued to believe that Sabbatai was the Messiah observed the *Torah* but looked forward to its ultimate demise once redemption was complete (Armstrong 2000: 29). Finally, a third group followed in the footsteps of their Messiah: as Sabbatai had done, they converted to mainstream faiths within their own cultures. Thus, in Europe Sabbateans converted to Christianity, while in the Middle East, they converted to Islam. Nevertheless, they continued to practice their true faith in private (Scholem 1961: 312–15). Without Armstrong or Scholem concerning themselves with dissonance theory, their historical insights into Sabbateanism reveal that believers found meaningful ways to understand and even emulate Sabbatai's actions. Of course, many Jews denied that Sabbatai was the Messiah, and the majority returned to the study of the *Torah* when Sabbatai was declared an apostate (Scholem 1973: 687–820). This is not to deny the considerable struggle of believers to make sense of what others viewed as an obvious falsification of Sabbatai's claim to be the Messiah. The notion that one has unequivocal proof of failed prophecy does not necessarily apply in real contexts. As with the Dein study of Lubavitch noted above, the followers of Sabbatai Levi were sane people trying to reason their way through spiritual understandings that to outsiders were simply efforts at irrational rationalization.

Both Armstrong and Scholem go on to document two very successful Sabbatean movements following Sabbatai's death. Most significant of these were the *donmeh* or converts (Armstrong 2000: 30). Starting with

the conversion of a few hundred families in Turkey, they grew to well over a 100,000 converts by the first half of the nineteenth century. Like their Messiah Sabbatai Levi, the *donmeh* practiced Judaism in secrecy (but collectively in hidden synagogues), while publicly praying in mosques (Scholem 1971). The *donmeh* contributed to the secular Young Turk Rebellion of 1908 (Armstrong 2000: 30). Thus, again without reference to dissonance theory, historical studies of Sabbateanism support field and participant observation studies of what is too easily dismissed simply as failed prophecy.

### *Failed Prophecy and Snake Handlers*

Bader (1999: 127–28) has argued that a future theoretical task is to propose testable hypotheses that clarify not only under what conditions failed prophecy will have specific effects but are also able to specify which members will leave a group if they perceive prophecy has failed. Hood and his colleagues have done this for the contemporary serpent handlers of Appalachia often identified as the “renegade” Churches of God. Using a variety of research methods, including laboratory-based quasi-experimental studies, phenomenologically based interviews, archival research, and ethnomethodology, this research is consistent with the call for a multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm in the psychology of religion noted above (Emmons and Paloutzian 2003, Hood and Belzen 2003, Park and Paloutzian 2003). It further addresses Bader’s concern for identifying the conditions under which members will leave or stay in groups that confront disconfirmation of beliefs, including those related to failed prophecy.

To cite but one example, Williamson and Hood (2004) have traced the history of the Church of God and her splinter sister The Church of God of Prophecy in their early support for handling serpents based upon the Gospel of Mark. Initially, they accepted as a literal mandate the words of Mark 16:17–18: “And these signs shall follow them that believe: In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak in new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them: they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover [KJV].” These early “sign following” churches accepted all of the signs specified above. Four were accepted as imperative by believers, while one, the drinking of “any deadly thing” was recognized as conditional.

Williamson and Hood (2004) have documented the enthusiastic support of these two future Pentecostal denominations for the practice of successfully handling serpents. Support for the practice was documented in both newspapers and church pamphlets. Early acts of successful handling amazed both believers and nonbelievers alike. The assurance was not only that the sick were healed and demons cast out, but the very tangible documentation that believers who picked up serpents in obedience to God's word were not harmed. However, as the practice continued, believers were bitten, many were maimed, and some suffered death (Hood 1998, Hood and Williamson 2011). Thus, the firm conviction that God would protect handlers from harm gradually gave way to the reality of bites, maiming and deaths. For some, this was a clear disconfirmation of protection, and it gradually led to the abandonment of the practice by both the Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy. The reality triumphed over the interpretation that handling serpents was a divine mandate. Today both these Pentecostal denominations minimize the role serpent handling played in their early history.

Nonetheless, if prophecy failed for what were to become two mainstream Pentecostal denominations, it was fulfilled for what are the so-called renegade Churches of God spread across contemporary Appalachia. Not only have these churches continued to handle snakes, they have also developed a variety of meaningful interpretations to account for bites, maiming and deaths. Specifically, the renegade Churches of God gradually negotiated a deeper understanding of the imperative to take up serpents given the anticipation that bites, maiming and deaths will occur. None of these is seen to be an instance of failed prophecy. Rather they are interpreted as signs to unbelievers of the depth of faith of those who are being obedient to God. Believers argue that the imperative is to take up serpents; nowhere in God's word does it say that one will not be bitten when doing so. Death by serpent bite is interpreted as assuring salvation, just as handling is an act of obedience to God who may call the faithful home by this means. Maiming is a sign to unbelievers of the faith of the handler. What would appear to disconfirm Mark 16:17–18 to some is confirmed by others who continue the practice.

Dissonance theory allows that, when beliefs and behavior are dissonant, congruence can be achieved by changing behavior and bolstering understanding of the beliefs that justify it. The conditions under which some perceive prophecy to fail and others see it to succeed are unlikely to

be revealed in laboratory experimental studies that mainstream psychological social psychologists endorse. Rather, the task requires the more painstaking immersion in fieldwork through which the complex ways in which believers reason their faith is exposed. One obvious difference in the serpent handling tradition is the extent to which the faithful believe that religious rituals can demand legitimate risk. The obvious success of the Church of God in terms of worldwide growth and to the lesser extent of the Church of God Prophecy was their willingness to endorse the more common cultural assumption that religious practices ought not to demand the risk of bodily harm to believers. Thus the Church of God abandoned serpent handling as a religious ritual when the reality of the danger became widely known. However, for those who continue to accept the risk, the intensity of their faith is proportional to the risk they take in practicing what they believe. Therefore, the same “facts” that led most to abandon the practice can also be interpreted by others as evidence to sustain the practice (Hood 1998, 2003, 2005, Hood and Williamson 2008, 2011).

### *Sociological and Psychological Social Psychologies in Dialogue*

The irony here is that *When Prophecy Fails* became classic to the more sociologically oriented. To the more psychologically oriented, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* published a year later became the “classic.” If *where* prophecy lives is a crucial factor, then we can return to the first text and Festinger’s own reflection on cognitive dissonance thirty years after the publication of *When Prophecy Fails* in 1956.

The occasion was a symposium at the 95th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association in 1986. Leon Festinger was the discussant with Elliot Aronson, Jack Brehm, Joel Cooper, and Judson Mills as participants. Fortunately, there is a published transcript of Festinger’s remarks (Festinger 1999). Reminding the reader that dissonance theory produced a massive and dominating experimental literature from psychologically oriented social psychologists who lived out their research careers in the laboratory, Festinger’s reflections are remarkable.

His appeal is to the sociologically oriented social psychology of *When Prophecy Fails* and not to the psychologically oriented social psychology of *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Festinger (1999: 384) stated, “One thing that I think has to be done is for more research to go on dissonance producing situations and dissonance reduction processes as they occur in

the real world.” In so doing, he acknowledged the common criticism that sociologically oriented social psychologists have long made of laboratory studies:

One of the things about laboratory experiments is that you can only get out of the stuff what you put into it and any good experimenter who is concerned in testing a part of the hypothesis is going to try to eliminate from the laboratory experiment all of the unwanted stuff that generally floats around, and dissonance arousing and dissonance reducing processes are not the only thing that affect man, using man in the generic sense. I think we need to find out how dissonance processes and dissonance reducing processes interact in the presence of other things that are powerful influences on human behavior and human cognition, and *the only way to do that is to do studies in the real world*. They’re messy and difficult. You don’t expect the precision out of these studies that you get in the laboratory (1999: 385 [emphasis added]).

This is a remarkable reflection, since the appeal is to methods common in sociologically oriented social psychology and whose research on failed prophecy was ignored by these symposium participants—all influential social psychologists rooted in the laboratory tradition where prophecy, if its studied at all, is sure to fail. Festinger did not in his reflection ignore the possibility of real world research raising interesting ideas that could be further clarified in laboratory studies, but he recognized what sociologically oriented social psychologists have long insisted, that where studies are done is as important as how they are done.

If there is a lesson in failed prophecy research, it is echoed in the decisive critiques of social psychology that would restrict itself to what Gergen (1973, 1982) has identified as scientific pretensions rooted in the very positivism and hypothesis testing laboratory studies that dominated the psychologically-oriented social psychology literature on dissonance. Sociologically oriented social psychologists have continued the tradition of at least locating their workspace outside the reality of laboratories. Even if Festinger had enough of the psychologist in him to suggest a return to the laboratory to clarify phenomena found in the real world, he was wise in his fading years to note that one cannot return to a location he or she is not willing first to leave. In this sense at least, he reverted to the sociological social psychology that was, however flawed, reflected in *When Prophecy Fails* and ignored in *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### THE FESTINGER THEORY ON FAILED PROPHECY AND DISSONANCE: A SURVEY AND CRITIQUE

JON R. STONE

Millennial expectation hit a fevered pitch in the year 1999. Not only were many Jewish, Christian, and alternative religious groups anticipating the dawn of a New or Messianic Age in this the seven-thousandth year since creation—the Sabbath Millennium—but tech-savvy pundits were warning of a coming cyber-apocalypse if the effects of the Y2K computer programming glitch were not averted. Typical of the expressions of public concern over the “Millennium Bug” were those voiced at the United States Senate field hearing on “The Year 2000 Technology Problem and Y2K Emergency Preparedness” held in the State of Oregon. As Vera Katz, then mayor of Portland, Oregon, observed: “The situation that is facing us at the local level, the phone calls and e-mails and letters certainly represent the fact that there is a lot of misinformation. There are a lot of rumors. There are a lot of predictions. There is also speculations [*sic*] about a total social breakdown, a lot of concerned citizens, and my fear is that whatever paranoia and panic is out there could increase if we don’t do what we are doing here this afternoon . . .” (U.S. Senate 1999: 10–11). In fact, one concerned citizen at the hearing, a Michael Cross, expressed the fear that every computer in every “department could be completely 100 percent compliant, yet it is the interface that could bring the whole thing down like a virus. That scares me. But probably more than that is public fear. You know, that scares me a little more.” Cross worried aloud that Y2K could be similar to but greater in its scope and consequences as the “1968 blackout” in New York City (which actually occurred in 1977, not 1968) in which, he said, during a 24-hour period “2,000 businesses were looted. There were 200 fires, lots of problems going on, people panicking . . . , so that probably is more of a concern for my family, as I think it is for a lot of people” (U.S. Senate 1999: 32).

Of course, the year 2000 arrived with hardly a hitch. Predictions by prophets, preachers, politicians, and “tech-perts” that the new millen-

nium could likely be greeted by social and economic upheavals proved false. People went on with their lives as if all of the anxiety and endtime hysteria of 1999 had never happened. Remarkably, a decade later, the current doomsday obsession and fear-mongering over so-called “global warming” follows nearly the same pattern of hype that we saw with the failed millennium bug prophecy.<sup>1</sup> This is also true, though to a lesser extent, of the prediction that, according to the ancient Mayan calendar, the world will end in December 2012.<sup>2</sup>

The reason I cite secular doomsday predictions as examples of failed prophecies is to point out that endtime expectation (prophecy) and disappointment (failure) are common human experiences. I also cite the examples of the panic over Y2K and the current debate over global warming to jar the reader into seeing doomsday predictions as a serious matter for truly committed believers. How committed believers handle the disappointment of failed expectations and the dissonance and disillusionment that failed predictions stir up within them—whether believing in secular or religious predictions—tells us something important about human and social psychology. It is said that man is not a rational being, but a rationalizing being (Batson 1975: 176). By this is meant that, by nature, humans are not consistent in their beliefs and behavior, but inconsistent, and uncomfortably so. The psychic discomfort caused by this inconsistency—that is, between beliefs and behavior, or between expectations and reality—creates the need in individuals to justify or in some other way account for and therefore min-

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of current trade book titles available on Amazon include: *An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It*, by Al Gore; *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity*, by James Hansen; *Down to the Wire: Confronting Climate Collapse*, by David Orr; *Now or Never: Why We Must Act Now to End Climate Change and Create a Sustainable Future*, by Tim Flannery; and *The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning*, by James Lovelock. Equally provocative trade book titles by global-warming “Deniers,” who just as zealously attack global-warming “Hoaxers,” can also be found on Amazon.

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of responses among American evangelicals to the Y2K non-event, see Cowan 2003. With respect to 2012 and the ancient Mayan calendar, Robert K. Sitler writes: “The Y2K phenomenon attracted the attention of millions around the world even though, in retrospect, the concerns about global digital collapse that reached international dimensions proved baseless. Similarly, public interest in 2012 does not depend on the date having any substantive significance beyond marking a cyclical change in an ancient calendar. The date’s presumed connection to an ancient Amerindian civilization that some in the New Age assume to have been more enlightened than our own gives 2012 an attractive power that may eventually even outstrip that of the Y2K non-event” (2006: 33).

imize the discrepancy. Disappointment is part of the human experience. How humans respond to dashed hopes, both as individuals and within a social context, provides sociologists and social psychologists an interesting glimpse into the rationalizing tendencies of the human mind.

There is perhaps no better example of the discrepancy between expectation and reality than that of a failed prophecy, especially one that takes place within a religious or quasi-religious setting. Time and again, end-time expectation and prophetic failure have presented committed believers with an interesting and persistent cognitive challenge: the problem of dissonance. Theoretically, cognitive dissonance arises when the beliefs, values, or opinions individuals hold—that is, their cognitions—come into conflict with their experience of reality. When dissonance occurs, there tend to arise countervailing psychological pressures within persons that cause them to seek ways of reducing or eliminating dissonance. The more importance that one has attached to these beliefs, values, or opinions, the greater then will be the dissonance. And, the more keenly one feels the dissonance, the more urgent will be the activities that one undertakes to reduce or relieve dissonance (Festinger 1957: 16). Most of the time, people respond to dissonance by bringing their thoughts in line with their experiences, that is, by abandoning their mistaken cognitions. But in some cases, the dissonance between what one believes will happen and what in fact does happen is not so easily resolved, especially if the conflicting beliefs or opinions have arisen from deeply-held religious convictions (Festinger 1957: 9–11).

For those researchers who have been fascinated by millenarian and predictive prophecy movements, the most interesting question has not been, “Why haven’t their prophecies come true?” but, “What happens when their prophecies fail?” How do people and their movements withstand so great a disappointment? How is it possible, in the face of obvious disconfirmation, for faith to survive unaffected? For over half a century now, speculation on responses of groups and individuals to failed prophecies has occupied the attention of a growing number of psychologists and sociologists of religion. In fact, the question of failed prophecy continues to intrigue scholars, perhaps more so since the Y2K non-event and, now, with evermore-cataclysmic predictions being uttered about the effects of global warming or with the approaching end of the Mayan calendar. Past historical experiences have taught us that, when these predictions fail, there will likely arise in their place new prophets uttering similarly urgent predictions, as well as new followers and new movements

to bear witness to the approaching doom (see, for example, Cohn 1970, Barkun 1974, Numbers and Butler 1987, Weber 1987, Stone 1993, Robbins and Palmer 1997).<sup>3</sup>

In a recent article published in *Nova Religio*, I offered (2009) a reassessment of the research that had emerged over the past half century on Festinger *et al.*'s theory on failed prophecy (1956). My purpose in that article was not simply to review the findings of these studies, but to question the assumptions that most researchers had been making up to that point, assumptions that had shaped their understanding of prophecy and dissonance, the role that prophecy plays in a religious movement, and the ability of prophets and their followers to manage dissonance by minimizing or trivializing the importance of disconfirmation. I also outlined three directions that Festinger-related research could take that might open new lines of inquiry into the problem of prophecy and dissonance, and thus lead the way out of the whirling eddy that this research had come to resemble. In the present chapter, I wish first to revisit my original remarks on Festinger's theory and modify parts of my earlier argument, including my lengthy but necessary overview of Festinger-related research, and then add more detail to my discussion on the new directions or lines of inquiry that current and future research could more fruitfully follow.

Before coming to my criticism of the direction of Festinger-related research, and before expanding upon the three new lines of inquiry into the problem of prophecy and dissonance, I will rehearse the theory presented by Festinger and his colleagues and then provide a sense of the direction that subsequent research into failed prophecy has taken. An interesting aspect of the research that has been conducted thus far is that *the original thesis that was put forward in 1956 by Leon Festinger and his team of researchers has held true: despite obvious and unequivocal disconfirmation, believers tend to respond to failed prophecy in ways that reaffirm their faith.*

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Barkun (1974: 43) observed that because millennial movements "enter the historical record only at those points where outsiders stumble upon them or where they reach a level of high public visibility," one can assume that millennial activities, spurred by predictive prophecy, have occurred and recurred without pause. "Occasionally social scientists move in quickly to examine an otherwise obscure cult, as Festinger, Riecken and Schachter [1956] and Lofland and Stark [1965] did in the cases of two American end-of-the-world movements. But these are exceptional cases, which do not add up to the representative picture that is required. As a result, millenarian movements live an underground existence most of the time. They may be of central significance in the lives of their members, but this centrality often coexists with public obscurity."

*Festinger's When Prophecy Fails*

The social-psychological consequences of prophetic disconfirmation were addressed over fifty years ago by Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken and Stanley Schachter in their landmark case study, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World*, published in 1956. Their main thesis is stated somewhat obliquely:

Suppose an individual believes something with his whole heart; suppose further that he has a commitment to this belief, that he has taken irrevocable actions because of it; finally, suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong; what will happen? The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before. Indeed, he may even show a new fervor about convincing and converting other people to his view (1956: 3).

In its basic formulation, the theory Festinger and his colleagues advanced in their book stated that an unequivocal disconfirmation of a prophesied event, in this case the expectation of a cataclysmic flood across the central United States and the miraculous rescue of the group's members by spaceships, creates a crisis of unbelief. This crisis is especially acute for those who have risked their jobs and reputations in support of their belief in the end of the world (or in some other way have taken demonstrative actions consistent with their firmly-held conviction)—as was the case with “The Seekers,” the pseudonym of the spirit-contact group that Festinger and his team observed before, during and after the crisis. As they argued:

The disconfirmation introduces an important and painful dissonance. The fact that the predicted events did not occur is dissonant with continuing to believe both the prediction and the remainder of the ideology of which the prediction was the central item. The failure of the prediction is also dissonant with all the actions that the believer took in preparation for its fulfillment. The magnitude of the dissonance will, of course, depend on the importance of the belief to the individual and on the magnitude of his preparatory activity (1956: 26–27).

Furthermore, according to Festinger *et al.*, while the best course of action for shaken believers would have been to discard their discredited beliefs and return to their former lives, “frequently the behavioral commitment to the belief system is so strong that almost any other course of action is preferable.” Indeed, they noted, “It may even be less painful to tolerate

the dissonance than to discard the belief and admit that one had been wrong." Still further, "the dissonance would be reduced or eliminated if the members of a movement effectively blind themselves to the fact that the prediction has not been fulfilled" (1956: 27).

However, to their surprise, in the face of obvious prophetic disconfirmation, the group they studied sought to reduce dissonance by actively proselytizing, that is, by telling people that their prediction had in fact been correct. Because of their faith in the prediction, God had spared the world. Thus, as the Festinger thesis asserts, if believers can convince outsiders of the truth of their message, perhaps persuading them to become members or supporters, this will reaffirm their faith, thereby serving to reduce the dissonance they feel in the face of prophetic disconfirmation:

The dissonance cannot be eliminated completely by denying or rationalizing the disconfirmation. But there is a way in which the remaining dissonance can be reduced. *If more and more people can be persuaded that the system of belief is correct, then clearly it must, after all, be correct....* If the proselytizing proves successful, then by gathering more adherents and effectively surrounding himself with supporters, the believer reduces dissonance to the point where he can live with it (1956: 28).

Although the Festinger thesis placed emphasis on a heightening of evangelistic fervor as the primary means by which shaken believers assuage their dissonance, successful conversion of all non-believers does not seem to be a necessary component of dissonance reduction. As Festinger and his team seemed to imply, irrespective of whether outsiders accept or reject the group's message, it is the proselytizing activity itself—the proclamation of their beliefs to outsiders—that serves to reduce dissonance and helps reconfirm their faith. What is more, in the minds of believers, rejection itself may become a type of confirmation. In this way, the reasoning of believers becomes circular: those who hear and believe will be saved, but those who do not believe are already lost.

Of course, Festinger did not hold that *all* experiences of failed prophecy would result in proselytizing activity. He and his colleagues laid out five conditions under which, in the wake of "unequivocal disconfirmation of a belief," one might expect to see an increase in proselytizing activity (1956: 3–4). As Benton Johnson indicated in the opening chapter, Festinger and his colleagues outlined their conditions as follows: (1) There must be conviction. (2) There must be commitment to this conviction. (3) The conviction must be amenable to unequivocal disconfirmation. (4) Such unequivocal disconfirmation must occur. (5) Social support must be available subsequent to the disconfirmation (1956: 216).

The first and second conditions concern the extent to which an individual's belief will be "resistant to change." The third and fourth conditions "point to factors that would exert powerful pressure on a believer to discard his belief." The fifth condition assumes that the untenable belief—the dissonant cognition—cannot survive without the support of other like-minded individuals, hence their thesis that failed prophecy spurs proselytizing activities. "If," as Festinger and his team noted, "the believer is a member of a group of convinced persons who can support one another, we would expect the belief to be maintained and the believers to attempt to proselyte or to persuade nonmembers that the belief is correct" (1956: 4).<sup>4</sup>

### *Festinger-Related Research on Failed Prophecy*

Despite the initial interest that *When Prophecy Fails* piqued among sociologists and social psychologists, reviews of this landmark study were not particularly favorable. Much of the criticism had to do with the undue influence that Festinger and his team might have exerted on the response of the Seekers to the failed prophecy (e.g., five of the fifteen persons present on the final night were part of Festinger's team). Some critics dismissed the book as a work of fiction. Others, such as Anthony F.C. Wallace, noted that Festinger himself was as much invested in his prediction as were Mrs. Keech and her followers. As Wallace put it: "The scientists' prophecies were in general fulfilled when the cult's prophecies failed" (1957: 325).

These criticisms notwithstanding, *When Prophecy Fails* found ready application in fields outside social psychology—fields as diverse as sociology, history, literary theory, biblical studies, theology, and rhetoric, most of these scholars accepting the theory at face value (see, as examples, Holloway 1966, Gager 1975, Jackson 1975, Carroll 1979, O'Leary 1994, Lee 1996, Murphy 2003).

Over the years a number of social scientists and other researchers have sought to test the Festinger thesis, especially the five conditions outlined above. Though no one has as yet refuted the thesis completely, all who

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<sup>4</sup> In his book, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Festinger listed six conditions, but referred to them as *characteristics* of millennial and messianic movements, not conditions. The additional condition was that "[t]he action [in response to the belief] is sufficiently important, and sufficiently difficult to undo, that the believers are, in a very real sense, committed to the belief" (1957: 247–48).



have sought to test “Festinger” have uncovered serious problems with it. The main problem has been the failure of subsequent cases to replicate the results of the original test case. This failure to replicate has led scholars to suggest ways by which to modify the Festinger thesis, especially the conditions under which failed prophecy can be expected to result in proselytizing activities. Of the twenty or more better-known case studies, I will discuss briefly a small, but representative, sample of them. This sampling of studies will include those published by Jane Hardyck and Marcia Braden (1962), Robert Balch, Gwen Farnsworth and Sue Wilkins (1983) and its follow-up study by Robert Balch, John Domitrovich, Barbara Lynn Mahnke, and Vanessa Morrison (1997), Susan Palmer and Natalie Finn (1992), Joseph Zygmunt (1972), Gordon Melton (1985), and Lorne Dawson (1999).

The direction that Festinger-inspired research has taken over the past fifty years was set by Jane Hardyck and Marcia Braden. In 1960, Hardyck and Braden learned of a Pentecostal Christian group that proved to be the perfect case in which to test the reliability of Festinger’s theory. Like Festinger’s Seekers, this Pentecostal last-days colony was expecting the end of the world to arrive with devastating abruptness and was taking similar steps to prepare for that event. Unlike the Seekers, however, the “Church of the True Word,” led by a prophetess named “Mrs. Shepard” (both pseudonyms), believed that a nuclear attack on the United States was imminent. Mrs. Shepard and her followers also believed that their survival was essential to the salvation of the world, in that God would bless them with the opportunity to evangelize the multitudes of dazed and distraught survivors. When approximately 103 True Word members emerged from their fallout shelters after 42 days to behold an unaltered world, they expressed, contrary to the Festinger thesis, little dissonance and showed little interest in evangelizing. In fact, after holding a “victory celebration” for having remained faithful to their beliefs, members were not encouraged to seek converts, nor did they feel compelled to publicize their views, even turning away a contingent of tourists, newspaper reporters and several television crews (1962: 138–39). Prophetic disconfirmation was unavoidable, but group members, it seemed, were able to reduce the level of dissonance by means of a communal celebration that served to reaffirm their faith and strengthen their ties to the group.

This curious response suggested to Hardyck and Braden that, to account for this variance from the response of the Seekers, Festinger’s theory needed two additional conditions. As Hardyck and Braden stated: “The two suggestions we have made for further conditions are that the

group provide only minimal social support for its members and that the group receive ridicule from the outside world” (1962: 141). Both of these additional conditions held true for the Seekers but not for the True Word colony: while the members of Festinger’s Seekers were not strongly tied as a group—there being three distinct subgroups—and they were ridiculed before and after the flood and flying saucer rescue prophecy failed, Mrs. Shepard had closely shepherded her flock through the ordeal, and the group was praised afterwards by local civil defense officials as a model of public preparedness (1962: 140–41).

Twenty years later, Robert Balch, Gwen Farnsworth and Sue Wilkins also studied a group that expected a nuclear holocaust to occur—this time in 1980—and likewise responded by entering fallout shelters to escape what they believed would be imminent annihilation. The results that Balch and his colleagues record did not follow Festinger, nor did they follow the findings of Hardyck and Braden. In fact, the Baha’i sect they closely observed met most of the conditions put forth by these two studies, but members failed to rally in the face of disconfirmation and did not proselytize. The leader’s first, but not immediate, response to the disconfirmation was to reset the prediction. But, by the time this new deadline was circulated among the membership, group members had already become inconsolably demoralized by the non-event. When the second predicted time arrived, few were as enthusiastic as before, and even fewer entered the bomb shelters. A third time was set, but no one, not even Doc (the prophet-leader), held out hope that the bombs would drop. As a result, a movement of 150 members located in four American states dwindled to a core group of about thirty-six. Moreover, although the leader encouraged members to proselytize, few, if any, did so.

At the same time, while many members left the group, little defection took place among the ranks of “genuine believers.” Also, a shift took place from talk about “when the bombs drop” to the need to be more dedicated to the teachings of their faith. As Balch and his team observed:

[M]ost believers had strong identities as BUPC [Baha’i Under the Provisions of the Covenant] that transcended their commitment to Doc’s prediction.... While most had been attracted to the faith by its apocalyptic orientation, they subsequently acquired a firm grounding in a coherent body of Baha’i teachings dating back over 100 years (1983: 150).

Doc’s failed endtime prediction of 1980 did not end his prophetic career, as a subsequent study by Balch and a different team of researchers reported: “Between 1980 and 1995 the group’s leader, Dr. Leland Jensen [Doc], set twenty dates for the battle of Armageddon or lesser disasters

that would lead up to the Apocalypse.” Interestingly, as time went on, and as Jensen continued to make predictions, “hardly anyone in the BUPC except for Jensen and a few members of his inner circle met [Festinger’s] first condition of deep conviction, and the commitments specified in [Festinger’s] second condition were minimal compared to those that members had made in 1980” (Balch *et al.* 1997: 74–75).

Also of interest in this follow-up study is the analysis that Balch and his colleagues offered, especially concerning the differing responses of Doc Jensen and his successor prophet, Neal Chase, and those remaining members of the BUPC. Before and after each prophecy failed, Jensen and Chase had responded in ways consistent with the Festinger thesis, but the responses of BUPC members did not follow Festinger. For instance, after Jensen’s failed prediction that, on April 29, 1986, Halley’s comet would be pulled into the Earth’s orbit, break up and pummel the planet for most of the next year, “members quietly resumed their lives . . . as if it were just another day.” By August of that same year, when it had become clear that Halley’s comet would pass by the earth without incident, members no longer openly talked about when, specifically, the world would end but how to be spiritually ready when the end does come. As Balch and his colleagues noted:

After each failed prediction, life for the BUPC continued on course. There were few traces of disillusionment among either new or old members.... Proselytizing continued unabated, but few members stressed the predictions when teaching the Faith. Instead they focused more on Jensen’s mission and the importance of being spiritually prepared when the prophecies of [the Book of] Revelation ultimately would be fulfilled (1997: 84–85).

Undeterred by their repeated failures to predict endtime catastrophes, Jensen and Chase continued to prophesy doom. But for their part, BUPC members became increasingly desensitized to these repeated predictions, preferring instead to expect Armageddon in *theory* all the while advancing Baha’i faith in *practice* (cf. Stone 2000: 10–12). So, by developing a “culture of dissonance reduction” and desensitizing members to repeated failures, the prophet can continue his or her career without jeopardizing the movement’s long-term goals or its prospects for survival.

At roughly the same time that Balch witnessed the BUPC’s multiple prophetic failures, Susan Palmer and Natalie Finn set out to compare the experiences of two Canadian millenarian new religious movements that had also lived through failed prophecies. In their study, one group disintegrated after the experience of disconfirmation while the other survived. Proselytizing activity, however, did not result in either case.

These findings struck Palmer and Finn as curious given the fact that in light of previous research, one of three possible responses to failed prophecy should predictably occur (1992: 399): first, a group survives and begins to proselytize (the Festinger Thesis); or second, a group survives but it does not proselytize (the conclusion of Hardyck and Braden); or third, a group neither survives nor proselytizes (the observation of Balch, Farnsworth, and Wilkins).

The question naturally follows: Why was the event of failed prophecy a success for the one group and not for the other? To account for this discrepancy, Palmer and Finn looked to the prophesied moment itself and examined how groups pass through this “rite of apocalypse.” As they explained, “waiting for world’s end is a symbolic act . . . and it requires the presence of ritual actors and the organization of sacred time and sacred space” (1992: 409). This ritual includes a collective gathering of members who witness the endtime event and a collective experience of its symbolic fulfillment. Ritual transformation in the form of a “rite of passage,” in which members emerge as more enlightened believers, seems to provide the necessary social and psychological supports to ensure reaffirmation of belief. For Palmer and Finn, then, “the ritual context in which ‘disconfirmation’ takes place is at least as important in determining the future success or failure of the movement as is the commitment to belief and the social context.” What is more, the prophet’s role becomes central to this ritual process, which includes the reception of the prophet’s message, the separation of the community in preparation of the event (a type of liminal state, *à la* Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner), and then a recognition that the experience has accorded members a new and heightened status as tried and true believers. Indeed, the prophet’s “skill and flexibility in facilitating groups, reinterpreting doctrines, and ‘orchestrating’ ritual appear to be essential for bringing about a ‘successful’ apocalypse—an event which might well be considered the *magnum opus* in a charismatic cult leader’s career” (1992: 399).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> One might add a dimension of nuance to the discussion of ritual as related to endtime prophecy by enlisting the support of Jonathan Z. Smith, who argued that “ritual is an exercise in the strategy of choice . . . as a human labor, struggling with matters of incongruity.” True, though his focus was on religious ritual as more broadly conceived, Smith could have just as easily been speaking about “rites of apocalypse” when he referred to ritual as a strategy of choice: “What to include? What to hear as a message? What to see as a sign? What to perceive as having double meaning? What to exclude? What to allow to remain as background noise? What to understand as simply ‘happening’?” (1982: 56–57).

Another direction in answering the question, "What happens when prophecy fails?" was taken by Joseph F. Zygmunt who, most notably, undertook the first comparative analysis of Festinger-related studies. Based on his examination of existing cases, Zygmunt theorized that success or failure in the face of a prophetic disconfirmation depended upon the type of adaptive strategies that groups and their leaders employed. In most cases, he argued, the adaptive strategies in some way involve constructing *non*-confirmation of a prophecy as a convincing alternative to acknowledging *dis*-confirmation of a prophecy. The reason for this is that "[r]eferences to supernatural personages, agencies, or events are quite commonly included in prophetic pronouncements, insulating them, at least in part, from empirically based logics of proof and disproof." Additionally, "[e]lements of ambiguity or uncertainty concerning the exact nature of expected events and especially the manner in which they will be brought about are also quite common, making empirical invalidation more difficult to perceive and creating a context favorable to 'prophecy-validating' selective interpretations" (1972: 247).

Although Zygmunt's data were largely anecdotal, his analysis does offer a helpful sketch of three responses and related modes of adaptation to failed prophecy that he saw as common to the millenarian groups he studied. As summarized, these include either: 1) acknowledgment of error and a restructuring of the group along more modified lines of expectation; 2) the assignment of blame, either internal or external, and a redirection of organizational resources toward either purification or revival of the group, greater evangelistic activities, or critique of the non-believing social order; or 3) a refusal to accept the failure of the prophecy and the reinterpretation of the group's beliefs along more symbolic, hence more unfalsifiable, lines (1972: 260–64). Or, to put it more directly, group members and their leaders either: acknowledge error and restructure the group; assign blame and purify the group; or refuse failure and reinterpret the prophecy. In each case, the adaptive response to prophetic failure is seen as a way to reduce, assuage, or otherwise dispel the cognitive dissonance that group members experience (for related analyses, see Sanada and Norbeck 1975, Sanada 1979, and Schmalz 1994).

A dozen years after Zygmunt's study, J. Gordon Melton attempted to focus attention more clearly away from cognitive dissonance and toward the dynamic of prophetic adaptation as found in Zygmunt's third response of religious groups to the exigencies posed by failed prophecy. In his study, Melton first took issue with Festinger and his colleagues for

assuming that the endtime prophecy is at the center of a group's belief system. Second, Melton challenged the notion that the prophecy failed, that is, that it failed for that group.<sup>6</sup> As Melton maintained, the prophecy is neither the centerpiece of a movement nor is it the linchpin of a group's doctrinal system. It is, however, part of a larger system of belief, what Melton called the "total gestalt" and, as such, exerts only a modest effect on the stability of a group's beliefs. As he put it, "though one or more prophecies may be important to a group, they will be set within a complex set of beliefs and interpersonal relationships. They may serve as one of several important sources determining group activity, but the prediction is only one support device for the group, not the essential rafter" (1985: 19).

Melton further argued that within the context of this total gestalt, prophecy does not actually fail. To be sure, its disconfirmation provides cognitive challenges for a movement, but paradoxically, those challenges strengthen beliefs rather than weaken them. The reason for this paradox, Melton explained, is that prophecies are reinterpreted by leaders and recast in spiritual terms. This response, Melton noted, is a completely appropriate cognitive action within the total belief system of religious groups wherein *spiritual* is considered greater and higher than *physical* and where humans recognize that they are apt to misunderstand divine utterances and misinterpret prophetic promptings or signs and portents heralding doom. As Melton pointed out, "[t]he denial of failure is not just another option, but the common mode of adaptation of millennial groups following the failure of a prophecy" (1985: 21; see Weiser 1974). Hence, prophecy does not fail but is reframed in spiritual categories. In this way, the prophecy is reinterpreted so that, in effect, it is "fulfilled," the fulfillment taking place on a spiritual rather than a physical plane. At the same time that the prophecy is being spiritualized, the group repairs its fragmented social bonds by reaffirming its solidarity to itself and its commitment to its higher ideals (as was the case with the BUPC).

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<sup>6</sup> Collins and Cox (1976: 435–36) offered a similar criticism: "For the events to illustrate [Festinger's] thesis, the non-destruction of the world must be seen as 'dissonance causing'—that is, as an actual refutation of the Keech thesis [i.e., prophecy]—and therefore, the Keech explanation must be seen as rationalization. But it may be that Mrs. Keech and her followers actually did save the world, and were informed of this by extra-terrestrial beings. In the latter case, the subsequent increasing in fervour and proselytizing, far from representing a triumph for Festinger, was a triumph for Mrs. Keech—an illustration not of cognitive dissonance resolution, but of straightforward reinforcement."

Momentary dissonance is reduced, therefore, when members embrace the spiritual fulfillment of what previously had been only a physically verifiable prophecy.

From Melton's observations, one might add that the cultural and social responses, as he terms them, work in tandem in virtually all successful cases. In addition, Melton tells us, the spiritualizing of a failed prophecy does not take hold or "work" until there are the necessary social supports upon which disappointed and discouraged members can lean. In the same way, social support, while critical, is not sufficient to assuage disappointment unless the failed prophecy, in turn, can be reinterpreted within the context of the group's overall system of beliefs. What happens when prophecy fails? According to Melton, since the group does not acknowledge disconfirmation, nothing happens. A reinterpretation of the prophecy and concomitant reintegration of group members significantly lessens the sting of failed prophecy, if not altogether relieving it.

Thus, in assessing the Festinger thesis, these and other studies point to one obvious flaw in Festinger's work: he and his colleagues appear to have placed too much emphasis on proselytizing activities as a response to failed prophecy. Indeed, most later research, especially that of Palmer and Finn, points to the idiosyncrasy of the Festinger "Lake City" Flying Saucer movement, as other similar flying saucer and extraterrestrial visitor groups did not become evangelistic any more or any less in the face of prophetic disconfirmation (for examples of other UFO and extra-terrestrial contact movements, see Lewis 1995, Denzler 2001, Partridge 2003, Tumminia 2005 and 2007, Brown 2007).

Despite these criticisms, few scholars have offered critiques that have completely undermined Festinger's findings. In fact, most seem either to amend the thesis or extend it through comparison to the experiences of other millennial/endtime groups. For instance, Lorne Dawson (1999: 61–62) summarized the findings of all previous case studies, from which, building on Palmer and Finn, he discerned five different types of responses to failed prophecy:

1. Some groups survive and begin to proselytize.
2. Some groups survive and continue to proselytize.
3. Some groups survive but their proselytizing declines.
4. Some groups survive but they do not proselytize.
5. Some groups neither survive nor proselytize.

In addition to offering a more systematic overview of Festinger-related research, Dawson sought to reorient discussion away from simply gaug-

ing responses to failed prophecy toward examining the ways by which groups and their leaders manage dissonance. To quote Dawson, “following the suggestion of Robert Prus [1976], I think prophetic failures might best be seen as one dramatic instance of a more pervasive aspect of all religious life, if not life in all groups and organizations: the interactive and collective management of dissonance” (1999: 76). And so, like Zygmunt and Melton, Dawson has been interested in extending the discussion of how group members adapt themselves to failed prophecy, the most prevalent being rationalization of failure and reaffirmation of faith. For, as Dawson himself concluded, “in these groups we are dealing with a significantly different standard of evidence than that applied by researchers. From their perspective there is ample ‘evidence’ of impending doom in the abundant imperfections of this world, and every reason to keep seeking dramatic release from these imperfections in the ever receding yet open-ended promise of the future” (1999: 78).

In the end, attempts to modify Festinger’s five conditions under which failed prophecy would result in proselytizing activities—including the more recent theoretical reorientation offered by Lorne Dawson (1999: 70–78; cf. Dein and Dawson 2008)—still fail to account for all cases. Generally speaking, people do not reduce dissonance caused by failed predictions by convincing and converting others, but they tend to employ any of a number of techniques (or adaptive strategies), not all of which are directed outward toward non-believers. For instance, the prophet or other spiritual leader may declare the failure a test of faith, as Mrs. Keech had done, or as both a test of faith and a warning to the world, as Mrs. Shepard had declared. He or she may blame rival leaders for the failure. They may denounce their members’ lack of faith or, in the case of the Ichigen-no-Miya sect in Japan, of allowing pride to tarnish their faith (Sanada 1979: 224, Stone 2000: 21). Or, as with Jehovah’s Witnesses and many post-Millerite Adventists, the prophet or the prophet’s immediate successors may rationalize the failure by spiritualizing the prediction or by pointing to non-empirical fulfillments of it (see Zygmunt 1970, Gausstad 1974, Penton 1985, Numbers and Butler 1987). Still others may admit to human error in interpreting the prophecy or in setting the endtime date. Or, undaunted, the prophet may make further predictions, and so build upon earlier, now spiritualized, prophecies (see Tumminia 1998, 2005, Dawson 1999, Stone 2000). Few groups abandon their beliefs. As Neil Weiser had noted as early as the mid-1970s, “Prophecies cannot and do not fail for the committed.” The core beliefs of the group “will remain intact” because a group’s behavior after disconfirmation is aimed largely



at reaffirming such beliefs. To Weiser, such behavior points to the “flexibility and ability of the millennial belief to adapt to new events,” events that non-believing outsiders—such as secular scholars and researchers—would assuredly expect to undermine the group’s confidence in their beliefs (1974: 20, 24).

### *Prophecy and Dissonance Revisited*

While all the studies cited above attempt to account for the persistence or non-persistence of a millenarian group or movement in the face of prophetic disconfirmation, none of these important studies examines dissonance itself. Indeed, with Festinger, all assume that dissonance arises in response to failed prophecy. But it seems to me that prophecy—whether predictions of coming destruction or of cosmic transformation—arises in response to the dissonance that believers experience living in a world that does not square with their deeply-held beliefs. That is to say, *dissonance gives rise to prophecy*. Even Festinger *et al.*, in their explication of dissonance theory, allowed for this alternative reading. As they explained:

Dissonance produces [psychological] discomfort and, correspondingly, there will arise pressures to reduce or eliminate the dissonance. Attempts to reduce dissonance represent the observable manifestations that dissonance exists. Such attempts may take any or all of three forms. The person may try to change one or more of the beliefs, opinions, or behaviors involved in the dissonance; to acquire new information or beliefs that will increase the existing consonance and thus cause the total dissonance to be reduced; or to forget or reduce the importance of those cognitions that are in a dissonant relationship (1956: 26).

Though Festinger assumed that disconfirmation creates dissonance, it is not necessarily the case that the normal state of individuals—believers as well as non-believers—is consonance. That is, while failed prophecy may be one occasion for cognitive dissonance, one could also argue that, since most millennial movements expect some dramatic change to occur, predictive prophecy may itself be an attempt to reduce or relieve the tension created by the perceived delay in Kingdom Come. The perceived postponement gives rise to a collective crisis of faith among members.

It is into this crisis that the prophet steps. The prophet’s endtime prediction—be it progressive or catastrophic—rallies members and temporarily reduces dissonance. Recurring cycles of prediction and fail-

ure may account for the ebb and flow of evangelism: believers evangelize because the Lord is coming soon and believers also evangelize because the Lord has failed to come (cf., Singelenberg 1989, Schmalz 1994). Accordingly, one might theorize that dissonance is not a consequence of failed prophecy but an occasion that might inspire a prophet to utter an endtime prediction and for a group's eager acceptance of it.

### *What More Can Be Said of Festinger's When Prophecy Fails?*

One thing that I particularly noticed while editing *Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy* (2000) was that it seemed evident that fewer and fewer of the scholars who later tested the Festinger thesis had actually read the book beyond the first or second chapters—in some cases, not even beyond page four, which lists the five conditions under which one would expect to see increased religious fervor in the face of prophetic disconfirmation. With only a few exceptions, many of the scholars that addressed the Festinger thesis appeared to be relying upon extracts and summaries rehearsed in earlier studies. As a consequence, it appeared to me that the Festinger thesis had been reduced to one statement, namely: Festinger holds true if, and only if, failed prophecy results in subsequent evangelistic activity. Any other activity, no matter how faith-affirming it might be, would be judged as refuting Festinger.

But, beyond the first or second chapters, one finds in Festinger a very intriguing story, a story that traces the history of the Lake City Seekers from the first telepathic contact Mrs. Keech received from outer space, to the formation of her small group; from intrigues within and between the group's networks and changing coalitions, to the various challenges to Mrs. Keech's leadership; and from lengthy descriptions of earlier failed spaceship arrival predictions, and of the failed prophetic event itself, to the eventual disbanding of the Seekers some months later. True, the story that Festinger and his colleagues told was aimed at reinforcing their thesis, but in reading the story, one finds other aspects related to prophecy and dissonance that can be of interest to the study of predictive prophecy movements. Though for some scholars who examined Festinger, the truth of this classic study turned on whether or not failed prophecy resulted in proselytization (any other activity being discounted or ignored), to my mind something much more noteworthy could be discovered within its pages.

While Festinger's main analysis focused on proselytizing activity as the type of activity through which recovery of lost conviction would likely be the most assured, at the same time he and his colleagues also observed that proselytizing activity was not the only means through which renewed confidence in one's beliefs could be gained. Near the end of the seventh chapter they write:

Though the focus of our study has been on proselyting behavior, it is evident that proselyting alone does not exhaust the variety of reactions to disconfirmation or of mechanisms by which the dissonance consequent on disconfirmation may be resolved. We have noted that following the major disconfirmation, Mrs. Keech made additional predictions.... Proselyting, after all, is not the sole means by which support for a belief system can be won.... It seems to us that these repeated predictions, in effect, represent a search for supporting evidence, for confirmation (1956: 214).

The point I am making here is that Festinger and his team recognized the possibility that the evangelistic response of the Lake City Seekers to failed prophecy could very well have been unique to this group. If so, then replication would not be likely, as further studies did, in fact, show.

But, were one to return to Festinger without being distracted by its well-worn thesis, one would find that as the study unfolds, there are a number of other theses that Festinger did not highlight or pursue. In short, it seems to me that there are many more nuggets that one can excavate from Festinger's classic work that others have overlooked. Let me outline three of these additional veins of gold—new lines of inquiry—that might open new areas of exploration into prophecy and dissonance.

#### *Deviant or Alternative Modes of Consonance*

First, Festinger is captivated by cognitive dissonance, that is, with how individuals deal with the inconsistency between what they know and what they experience, between what they expect and what actually comes to pass. In fact, the next year Festinger authored a ground-breaking monograph on cognitive dissonance, and, for the next fifty years, the field of social psychology was dominated by dissonance theory. Impressively, write Eddie Harmon-Jones and Judson Mills, this theory has “generated hundreds and hundreds of studies, from which much has been learned about the determinants of attitudes and beliefs, the internalization of values, the consequences of decisions, the effects of disagreement among persons, and other important psychological processes” (1999: 3;

cf. Brehm and Cohen 1962, Festinger 1964, Aronson 1969, Wicklund and Brehm 1976, Greenwald and Ronis 1978, Gerard 1992, Greenwald 1992, Cooper 2007).

In its original formulation, cognitive dissonance was regarded as a drive that impels people to seek relief from dissonance-producing cognitions. As Festinger put it, “[c]ognitive dissonance can be seen as an antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction just as hunger leads to activity oriented toward hunger reduction” (1957: 3). The existence of two inconsistent cognitions or of behaviors that are inconsistent with one’s beliefs creates a motivational tension that requires resolution. To take an example from Festinger, the knowledge that smoking is harmful to one’s health is dissonant with the behavior of the person who smokes. To gain consonance, one would expect the person to quit smoking. But, as Festinger noted, the person might just as well offer reasons to justify his or her continued smoking, such as: smoking is relaxing and pleasurable; smoking is not as harmful as the experts claim; there are worse things in life than smoking; smoking keeps my weight under control; smoking is an activity that defines my rugged and rebellious lifestyle; or everyone dies from something, so I may as well die from smoking. With these kinds of rationalizations in hand, a smoker can reduce dissonance and continue to behave in a way that others might view as deviant. But even more likely, the smoker will seek out and associate with other (deviant) persons who smoke (see Festinger 1957: 2–3). In reference to religious beliefs, one can expect that people tend to seek out and associate with others who share similar, if not the same, religious views. This would be an example of dissonance seeking consonance.

Fundamental to Festinger’s argument in *When Prophecy Fails* is the assumption that, in terms of human cognition, dissonance is always seeking consonance, discord always seeking concord. Against Festinger, one could argue that people routinely hold contradictory opinions and discordant views, even about the things they believe in deeply and cherish the most. People are continually bombarded by conflicting information and are forced to adapt to the cognitive changes that that new information brings. Some find consonance by accommodating themselves to the cognition less amenable to change, while others find consonance by neutralizing dissonance, such as seeking out others who hold similarly dissonant views (cf., Abelson 1959, Dunford and Kunz 1973, Shaffer 1975, Goethals 1992, Simon, Greenberg and Brehm 1995, Burris, Harmon-Jones and Tarpley 1997, Cooper and Stone 2000, and Harmon-Jones 2000). In any case, based on the existing literature, it seems clear to me that within

human experience dissonance is the *norm* and consonance the *abnorm*. People seek what they deem as the ideal, whether in education, occupation, marriage, family life, politics or religion. Failing to achieve their ideal, they rationalize or trivialize or socialize so as to be less anxious about their choices and more able to cope with life's many disappointments.

If one were to apply this observation to Festinger and failed prophecy, one might argue that the people who joined the Lake City Seekers were already living discordant lives. By joining with Mrs. Keech, they were bringing a measure of consonance into their lives, even if their beliefs were regarded as deviant from the perspective of mainstream Americans (including social psychologists). As argued above, the prophecies were likewise a means by which dissonance could be resolved. Put another way, to believe in extraterrestrial contact places a person in dissonance with a society in which such belief is sheer nonsense. But, finding and joining a group of like-minded Seekers brings with it a measure of consonance.<sup>7</sup> Deviance is not deviance to the deviant. It is merely an alternative mode of normality (Ellwood 1979).<sup>8</sup>

To believe a prophecy that this group of Seekers had been chosen by extraterrestrials to warn the world of a coming deluge brings with it even greater confirmation—that is, greater consonance.<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Keech's

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<sup>7</sup> Among sociologists, the "birds of a feather flock together" principle, in which people seek to create communities of mutual interest and agreement, is known as *homophily* (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; cf., McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Though not directly related to failed prophecy, *homophily* implies two ways that people may seek to reduce dissonance: 1) associate only with those with whom one agrees, and/or 2) avoid contact with those who hold beliefs or opinions contradictory from one's own. In two contemporaneous studies, Festinger (1950, 1954) presented several hypotheses on social conformity that appear to support the *homophily* principle.

<sup>8</sup> This alternative reality is a world in which individuals, to quote Balch and Taylor, share "a metaphysical world-view in which reincarnation, disincarnate spirits, psychic powers, lost continents, flying saucers, and ascended masters are taken for granted.... This milieu consists of a loosely integrated network of seekers who drift from one philosophy to another in search of metaphysical truth.... Within the metaphysical social world, the seeker is not disparaged as a starry-eyed social misfit. Instead, he is respected because he is trying to learn and grow ... always open to new ideas and alternatives." In this way, the life of the seeker, even when faced with a crisis or setback, such as that of a failed prophecy, "is seen as an infinite series of 'growth experiences,'" and "[w]hile the cynic might argue that this is nothing more than a convenient rationalization for a stupid mistake, it is clear that the quest for growth is part of the seeker's vocabulary of motives ... that is learned and shared in the cultic milieu" (1977: 850–51).

<sup>9</sup> One of the influences on the ideas of the Seekers was that of Dianetics/Scientology, which espoused a mythology based on extra-terrestrial visitation to earth. In fact, in an

interpretation of failed prophecy as a test of the group's worthiness becomes easily accepted by members who already see themselves as the chosen ones. What is more, Festinger *et al.* reported that the Seekers had passed through a series of earlier tests of faith (see, e.g., 1956: 96, 143, 147, 152–55). These earlier trials could be viewed by the Seekers as paving the way for this last and greatest of tests. Little surprise, then, that group members would celebrate passing this final test with enthusiasm and relief.

### *The Phenomenon of Prophecy*

Second, and closely related to the first point, while Festinger's focus was on prophecy, he did not spend much time examining the phenomenon of prophecy itself. He was interested only in *failed* prophets, such as William Miller and Sabbatai Zevi. Very few, if any, scholars who have sought to test the Festinger thesis have, in fact, thought to examine the nature and purpose of prophecy. While almost all religious movements have recognized the gift of prophecy, not many of these movements have boasted prophets who exclusively predict the end of the world or some other coming disaster. Historically, as well as in the present day, most prophets guide their respective communities by providing timely revelations or by receiving a "word of the Lord" in season or out (see Lindblom 1962, Heschel 1969, Wilson 1980, and Aune 1983). In some cases, the prophet is in possession of the divine, while in other cases the prophet is possessed by the divine. In the first case, the prophet functions as a diviner; in the second case, the prophet serves as a medium (for a discussion of prophecy and divination and its practice in Africa, see Peek 1991, Johnson 1994, and Anderson and Johnson 1995).<sup>10</sup>

Prophecy, then, is first and foremost a dialogue between an inspired prophet and a receptive people, not simply or exclusively between the

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early book of Dianetics case studies by L. Ron Hubbard (1960), some of the past life experiences that were recounted by those undergoing auditing included space travel and prior existence as extra-terrestrials (see cases 4–6, 9–11, 13–16, and 33–35).

<sup>10</sup> There is an elaborate variety of prophets in eastern Africa: some prophets inherit their status while others are seized by spirits; some gain knowledge through inspiration, while others receive spirit instruction; some earn a living by divination, others do not; some declaim against magic, while others use sorcery; some prophets live within a community, while others wander from place to place; some are revolutionaries, while others are keepers of tradition; some emerge during times of crisis, while others are "destroyed" by crisis; and some prophets bring war, while others bring peace (see Anderson and Johnson 1995: 6; see also Johnson 1994: 328–31).

prophet and his or her divine source. Moreover, the oracle that a prophet receives is, more often than not, benign. That is to say, prophets, in uttering their “word of the Lord,” are usually offering solutions to existing dissonance or dissonances that group members have been experiencing.<sup>11</sup> As before, prophecy and its reception appear to be a cycle that very likely begins with, not results in, cognitive dissonance. In cases when prophecies of doom are uttered, though sudden and shocking to outsiders, such prophecies are not viewed by group members as inconsistent with the group’s understanding of the sacred cosmos or with its expectation that the world will end some day very soon.

That is to say, endtime prediction emerges within a worldview that is itself born from and carefully nurtures endtime expectation—a prophetic or millennial milieu, as it were. Or, to quote from *Expecting Armageddon*, “prophets carefully cultivate a climate—a prophetic milieu—in which their predictions are not only encouraged but eagerly received by their followers” (2000: 25; see Wallis 1979). Prophets who make endtime predictions do so confidently, knowing that such predictions will be viewed by and therefore received by group members as sensible as well as expectable. It is expectation, rather than prediction, that in fact becomes a defining characteristic of millennial movements—the expectation that the old order world will end and that a new and better world is on the horizon.

### *Social Networks and Prophetic Rivalries*

Finally, and briefly, I continue to come back to the thought that scholars—perhaps even Festinger himself and his team—were overlooking the importance of the social networks and leadership dynamics within Mrs. Keech’s Lake City Seekers club, especially the types of people who had been drawn to the group in the first place. It is notable that Mrs. Keech, as well as several members of her group, had belonged to or known each

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<sup>11</sup> Two notable examples of prophetic dialogue are the prophecies (or oracles) spoken by the Muslim prophet Muhammad in the *Qurʾān*, and by the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, Jr., in the *Doctrine and Covenants* (*D&C*). In a number of instances, both Muslim and Mormon oracles concern fairly mundane matters, such as who should marry whom, how many wives one must take, or whether one person or another should hold an important leadership position (cf., *Qurʾān* suras 33:37–38, 66:1–6, and 112, with *D&C* sections 124:125–28 and 132:1–4, 52, 60–62). Interestingly, Muslim and Mormon revelatory pronouncements (in both prophetic and oracular forms) are not all that different in tone or content from the prophecies and other promptings that Mrs. Keech, Bertha Blatsky and Mrs. Lowell were reported to have received from their respective spirit guides.

other through prior involvement in Dianetics (see Festinger *et al.* 1956: 34, 87–88, 93–94; cf. Wallis 1979: 47). Prior to her début as a “prophet,” Mrs. Keech had been active in Theosophy and read widely in spiritualist literature, being particularly interested in the writings of Guy Ballard and in *Oahpse*, a work that its author, John Ballou Newbrough, claimed had been revealed to him by higher spiritual powers (see Festinger *et al.* 1956: 33–34). And, as is well known, Madame Blavatsky (1831–1891), a founder of Theosophy, had herself received spirit-inspired messages and published numerous works that she believed had been revealed to her by transcended “Masters” who guided her pen. This was especially true of her signature work, *Isis Unveiled* (see Ellwood 1979: 112–22, Prothero 1996: 41–59).

Not only did Mrs. Keech and members of her group share a common worldview, but Mrs. Keech’s two prophetic rivals also drew from these common sources. While Mrs. Keech received messages by auto-writing from Sananda, the spirit-world name of Jesus Christ, and other spirit-beings known as Guardians, Bertha Blatsky, who had been a member of a Scientology group, channeled “The Creator” *viva voce*. Mrs. Keech’s other rival, Mrs. Lowell, herself a gifted medium, was in continual contact with her familiar spirit “Dr. Browning,” an equally high-level spirit-being who spoke through Mrs. Lowell during regular séances (Festinger *et al.* 1956: 33, 88, 103–05). But, according to Festinger and his colleagues, it was only during this period—between the time that the flood prediction occurred and the disconfirmation took place—that Mrs. Keech’s two rivals came to the fore. During the critical final days, all three prophets uttered competing messages, messages that served only to distract and confuse members, sow seeds of doubt and disrupt, for a time, disrupt the Seekers’ endtime preparations.

Accordingly, one might ask the following questions related to Festinger and his colleagues: What effect did this rivalry have on the solidarity of the group? Did receiving competing oracles create divisions within the group along or across existing social networks? Did such contradictory predictions from several of the “spacemen” who visited Mrs. Keech’s home (1956: 151–56) or from an earlier telephone call from “Captain Video” (1956: 140) tacitly challenge the group’s confidence in Mrs. Keech or in the flood and flying saucer rescue predictions? Did such prophetic rivalries contribute to the group’s eventual demise?<sup>12</sup> By focus-

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<sup>12</sup> For several specific episodes of the rivalries among Mrs. Keech, Bertha Blatsky and Mrs. Lowell, see Festinger 1956 *et al.*: 92–105, 110–19, 121–25, 128–29.



ing on this dynamic in the account provided by Festinger and his colleagues, researchers could examine in greater detail the prophetic rivalries that may emerge during the period following an endtime prediction, when the movement is preparing for doomsday and individual and group anxieties (i.e., dissonance) heighten in anticipation of the end.

Thus, to conclude, fifty years after the publication of Festinger's *When Prophecy Fails* strikes me as an appropriate moment to stop and reassess whether the Festinger thesis still informs current research into the social psychology of predictive prophecy movements, and whether anything new can be said about this classic study. While Festinger remains a useful starting point, it no longer seems necessary for scholars to retrace the steps of those who have sought to test its thesis. It is not enough to continue to ask "What happens when prophecy fails?" What is of greater interest is why predictive prophecy movements exist and continue to exist, and how the interplay between prophet and people appears to create a world in which the dissonance that believers experience in their earthly lives is relieved, if only temporarily.<sup>13</sup>

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### CLEARING THE UNDERBRUSH: MOVING BEYOND FESTINGER TO A NEW PARADIGM FOR THE STUDY OF FAILED PROPHECY

LORNE L. DAWSON

The terms “prophet” and “prophecy” have an archaic ring these days. Perhaps that is why there is no phenomenology of prophecy in the contemporary study of religion. It is a curious omission, given the obvious role played by prophecy in the development of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and many other religions. Prophecy continues, moreover, to be a primary source of religious innovation and transformation. In the modern context, one needs only think of such conspicuous examples as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Theosophy, Pentecostalism, the Unification Church, The Children of God / The Family, and much of the New Age Movement. The historical literature on millennialist beliefs and movements is extensive. But we lack a sufficiently social scientific understanding of how and why prophecies are made, gain attention, are deemed successful or forgotten. We lack a systematic sociology of prophecy, its functions and consequences.

Indirectly, however, some of the foundations are being laid for such an enterprise in the study of why people so commonly and counter-intuitively retain their faith in the face of the failure of prophecy. In this limited way social scientists have kept attention focused on the neglected functions of prophecy, but the research is too fragmentary and episodic. There is a litany of case studies of groups that have experienced a failure of prophecy, examining how they responded to a failure and whether they survived. But, with a few key exceptions, insufficient attention has been given to sustained comparative analysis of the full range of cases.

Some important insights have been provided, however, in the work of Joseph Zygmunt (1972), Lorne Dawson (1999, 2011; Dein and Dawson 2008), and Jon Stone (2000, 2009). Each of these studies presses home the need to move beyond seizing on new instances of failed prophecy to retest the validity of the theory of cognitive dissonance first advanced in Leon

Festinger, Henry Reicken and Stanley Schacter's *When Prophecy Fails* (1956). This psychological theory has cast a long shadow over the study of failed prophecy, and the authors of these theoretical essays stress the need for a more sociological understanding of the processes influencing the precise nature and the relative success of the different responses to prophetic disconfirmation. Their insights and recommendations differ, but they share much as well.

In this chapter I offer a synthetic analysis of these perceptive critiques of the case literature, with an eye to summarizing what we have learned so far and how best to proceed. But first I attempt to sort out the confused legacy of *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), correcting some persistent misunderstandings, and establishing the reasons for organizing our research in a new manner. This entails delineating some basic conceptual and methodological problems in a more thorough manner than has been attempted to date. Then I offer a new approach, one focused on the systematic study of the four primary social processes shaping the nature and success of the dissonance management strategies groups implement in the face of failed prophecies: (1) the socialization of members to prophecy and its expectations; (2) the preparations made for a prophetic event; (3) the way leaders respond to a failed prophecy; and (4) the nature and degree of in-group social support. This approach grew out of my research on two classic cases of failed prophecy: the messianic movement among the Lubavitch (Dein and Dawson 2008) and the Church Universal and Triumphant (in this volume). This approach provides a generic framework for detecting and linking the many factors influencing how, and how well, groups respond to failures, as identified in the empirical and theoretical literature. It simplifies matters productively by providing convenient categories for breaking down, itemizing and investigating the pertinent processes and sub-processes, without losing sight of the more complex whole. In doing so it counters the episodic character of the case study literature by systematically encouraging investigators to treat instances of failed prophecy sequentially as part of two wider social processes and hence explanatory contexts: the social dynamics of prophecy in general and the overall development of groups making prophecies. The theoretical analyses examined all encourage consideration of the two latter points.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> To date only one study, by Chris Bader (1999), has sought to develop a true explanatory alternative to cognitive dissonance theory. He does so by reverting to propositions

*The Confused Legacy of Festinger et al.*

As is well known, in *When Prophecy Fails* Festinger and his colleagues argue that when people with strong religious commitments are confronted with the disconfirmation of an important prophecy, they will choose—contrary to common sense—to reinterpret the failure rather than abandon their beliefs or the leader who made the prophecy. What is more, they are likely to reaffirm and bolster their beliefs, in the face of a seeming refutation, by renewing their efforts to convert others to their point of view. They will do so to relieve the emotional distress generated by the dissonance between their convictions and their experiences, trying to restore the semblance of cognitive consistency to their views of the world. This theory of “cognitive dissonance” stems, in part, from the intimate study of a small band of believers dubbed The Seekers.<sup>2</sup> This group harkened to the prophetic warnings of imminent catastrophe made by Mrs. Marion Keech (a pseudonym).

This much is common knowledge, but we need to be more careful in addressing what Festinger *et al.* actually say, since it has exerted such a strong and controversial influence on later research. On the first page of *When Prophecy Fails* they write:

Suppose an individual believes something with his whole heart; suppose further that he has a commitment to this belief, and that he has taken irrevocable actions because of it; finally suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong; what will happen? The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before. Indeed, he may even show a new fervor about convincing and converting other people to his view (1956: 3).

This is the first and quite precise statement of the basic elements of the theory of cognitive dissonance, and it is important to pay attention to the wording since the devil is in the details. Over the years the

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from the rational choice theory of religion of Rodney Stark and colleagues (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1996; Stark and Finke 2000). On first reading Bader’s approach is beguiling in its simplicity and seeming fit with the data, but closer scrutiny reveals that he is mistaking a mere indicator of probable outcomes in instances of failed prophecy for an explanatory variable. Consequently, I omitted consideration of his views from this analysis. (For a detailed analysis, see Dawson 2011.)

<sup>2</sup> Curiously, the forward to Festinger’s *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957), written in March 1956, provides an alternative account of the origins of the theory and makes no mention of *When Prophecy Fails* (1956) or the field study on which it is based.



theory has been subjected to a great deal of criticism, but not always with adequate justification or care for what Festinger *et al.* actually said.

In saying this I am not referring to whether *When Prophecy Fails* is a methodologically sound study. It seems likely that it is not, for the reasons discussed below. Here my concern is whether the theory proposed by Festinger *et al.* has been mistreated by many later commentators. Researchers commonly lament the continued influence of cognitive dissonance theory on discussions of failed prophecy because, they argue, it has not been confirmed. In fact some writers go so far as to say it has been refuted by later case studies (e.g., Melton 1985: 18–19, Bainbridge 1997: 137, Stark and Iannaccone 1997: 142–43, Stone 2000: 23–24, Stark 2001: 221, Tumminia 2005: 155). For example, Rodney Stark (1996: 220) asserts: “There have been a number of subsequent tests of the [Festinger *et al.* thesis], *none* of which found the predicted outcome.” Chris Bader similarly declares (1999: 120): “[N]o case study of a failed prophecy . . . has provided support for the cognitive dissonance hypothesis.” But in making these claims it is not always clear just what has been refuted, and the attempt to break the stranglehold of cognitive dissonance theory can do more harm than good, if it is not done correctly

To move beyond Festinger *et al.* we need to consider a number of basic conceptual and methodological problems that have yet to receive the systematic treatment they deserve. The fragmentary and incomplete discussion of these issues has left most researchers talking at cross-purposes, generating more confusion than clarity. A sharper understanding of the nature and implications of these criticisms sets the stage for the delineation of four more fundamental problems with using the theory of cognitive dissonance as the primary organizing principle or “paradigm” of studies of instances of failed prophecy, clearing the way for the creation of a new more fertile field of study.

### *Conceptual Issues*

Contrary to the expectations of outsiders, it is rare for a group to disintegrate after bad things fail to happen as predicted. The case literature demonstrates overwhelmingly that most groups survive the failure of prophecy. By reinterpreting the prophecies, these groups tend to take the disconfirmation more or less in stride (see the summary analyses of Dawson 1999, Stone 2000). But some groups do fail, as illustrated by the sudden demise of the Mission de l’Esprit Saint (Palmer and Finn

1992) and the first generation of the Branch Davidians of Waco (Newport 2006, Dawson 2011). Consequently, blanket dismissals of *When Prophecy Fails* are misleading, since this central aspect of the original Festinger *et al.* thesis has stood the test of time quite well.

Few groups, however, revert to intensified proselytizing to overcome the dissonance set off by a failure, and in this regard the Festinger *et al.* thesis has fared less well. Again, though, it is misleading to state or imply that increased proselytizing never happens, with the intent of refuting the Festinger *et al.* thesis. Even Stone (2000: 23, 2009), who is otherwise careful on this count, misleadingly states that the evangelistic response of The Seekers was “peculiar” to that group and “largely idiosyncratic.” This is simply not the case. Renewed proselytizing in the wake of a prophetic disconfirmation is rare, but there are some important examples, ranging from the early Christians or the followers of Shabbetai Zevi to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the second generation of Branch Davidians, and the Lubavitch Hasidim (e.g., Zenner 1966, Zygmunt 1970, Jackson 1975, Wernik 1975, Gager 1975, Hazani 1986, Shaffir 1995, Marcus 1996, Dein 2001, Newport 2006, Dein and Dawson 2008).

In general there is quite a bit of confusion about the nature and role of increased proselytizing in Festinger *et al.*’s theory, hence its relevance to other cases of failed prophecy. Stark, for instance, rejects the validity of cognitive dissonance theory in explaining the response to failed prophecy because he identifies the theory too closely with the prediction of increased proselytizing, and he places too much credence in a few studies demonstrating, supposedly, that this did not occur (e.g., Hardyck and Braden 1962). Yet his critique is given, ironically, in an endnote to his book *The Rise of Christianity* (1996), and many other scholars, including Festinger *et al.* (1956: 6), point to the proselytizing of the early Christians to support the very theory Stark is rejecting (Jackson 1975, Wernik 1975, Gager 1975, Marcus 1996; cf. Melton 1985: 19).

Stark seems to be of two minds. In his book the endnote is inserted in the midst of a critique of the explanatory adequacy of the theory of cognitive dissonance, in particular its failure to tell us how groups succeed in rationalizing failed prophecies without a loss of credibility—a valid criticism to which I will return. But in making the criticism he asks (1996: 186): “[H]ow did the Christians avoid doctrinal shifts away from hope of converting the multitudes—shifts that similar groups have so often made?” In other words, he acknowledges, in fact he highlights, the very thing he denies in the endnote. The early Christians behaved exactly as the theory of cognitive dissonance predicts. The “miracle” of

early Christianity is that the Christians kept their faith and continued to evangelize actively even when the second coming was postponed. Could it be because at this point in *The Rise of Christianity* Stark is attempting to persuade us of the merits of an alternative approach, arguing that martyrdom played the crucial role in sustaining the hope of the early Christian community?

Much the same agonistic dynamic guides the dismissive treatments of the theory of cognitive dissonance in Stark and Iannaccone's "Why the Jehovah's Witnesses Grow so Rapidly: A Theoretical Application" (1997: 142–43) and Bader's "When Prophecy Passes Unnoticed: New Perspectives on Failed Prophecy" (1999: 120). It even plays a role in J. Gordon Melton's otherwise commendable essay "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation: What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails" (1985: 18–19). There has been a tendency to be too hasty, throwing the baby out with the bath water. Alternatively, the cumulative evidence suggests we need to proceed more cautiously—discerning, for example, the factors that influence if, when and why groups do or do not revert to increased proselytizing, if we wish to make real theoretical progress (see Dawson 1999, Stone 2000).<sup>3</sup>

As Stone notes, Festinger *et al.* are partially responsible for this regrettable situation: "Much of the problem with the Festinger thesis . . . seems to stem from its overemphasis on proselytism as a means of relieving dissonance, an emphasis that has tended to obscure some of its more subtle and insightful observations" (2000 24).<sup>4</sup> *When Prophecy Fails* begins with the problem of explaining why it is so hard to convince people with strong convictions to change their views, even in the face of clear evidence that they are wrong (1956: 3). In this passage Festinger *et al.* go on to state that people emerge from a confrontation with contradictory evidence "not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of [their] beliefs," and they "may even show a new fervor about convincing and converting other people." Note the qualified and tentative nature

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<sup>3</sup> At one point Stone, however, also writes: "The strong criticisms leveled at the Festinger study—which has not been unlike an ocean liner that developed leaks soon after its first launch—have all but scuttled its reliability for predicting responses to failed prophecy" (2000: 23). The statement is contrary, I think, to the gist of his summary analysis.

<sup>4</sup> As McGhee (2005: 217 n. 46) itemizes, Festinger *et al.* discuss their interest in proselytizing repeatedly (cf. Festinger *et al.* 1956: 4, 28, 37, 38, 52, 53, 75, 100, 103, 114, 131, 134–35, 148–49, 182, 194, 208–15.)

of the assertion about proselytizing. By the end of the same page, however, a subtle shift occurs. Festinger *et al.* restate their theory more definitively in terms of a set of five conditions “under which increased proselytizing would be expected to follow disconfirmation.” A close reading reveals that the actual terms of the theory have not changed, just the primary focus. In the first statement, the focus is on the persistence of belief in the face of refuting evidence. In the latter instance, the focus is on the reversion to proselytizing.

The reasons for this subtle but important shift are unclear. Are the authors seeking to bring their theory more in line with what they think happened with The Seekers—though the evidence of increased proselytizing for the Seekers is in fact ambiguous? Or is the shift born of a desire to bring their argument more in line with their conception of the dictates of a scientific hypothesis? Whatever is the case, as Stone argues (2000: 25), it is a “misstep” and unnecessary. The key insight is the surprising tenacity with which most people will cling to their beliefs, and why—which is only expressed sometimes in a rejuvenated desire to convince others. As later researchers discovered and stress, seeking to convert others is just one means that might be used to bolster one’s faith.

In general there is a curious disconnect, as Glen McGhee (2005: 207–08, 219) notes, between the reception of the theory of cognitive dissonance in psychology and sociology. On the one hand, Festinger enjoys an exalted status in the discipline of psychology, and the central premise of dissonance theory has been elaborately and extensively verified in experimental social psychology (e.g., Harmon-Jones and Mills 1999, Olson and Stone 2005, Cooper 2007). But little or no attention is paid to *When Prophecy Fails* in this research literature, and the specific controversy over intensified proselytizing is ignored. On the other hand, in sociology Festinger’s views are universally criticized, and attention dwells exclusively on *When Prophecy Fails* and its prediction of increased proselytizing. Other important work on cognitive dissonance is almost totally neglected by sociologists. These remarkable disciplinary blinders have severely handicapped the social scientific study of how groups cope with failed prophecies. An integrated approach is desperately needed, though the complexity of the task exceeds my reach in this chapter. More modestly I will continue to delineate the conceptual and methodological problems that have afflicted the study of failed prophecies, indicating how we might begin to refashion our grasp of the most pertinent issues for the sociological analysis of instances of failed prophecy.

In the sociological discussion of the cognitive dissonance theory there has been a tendency to over-interpret and misuse another important study, Jane Hardyck and Marcia Braden's "Prophecy Fails Again: A Report of a Failure to Replicate" (1962), an error noted as well by Glen McGhee (2005: 208). Hardyck and Braden studied a small American Christian evangelical group they called the Church of the True Word. The 135 members of this group built bomb shelters in which they spent 42 days and nights waiting to escape a predicted nuclear disaster. When the prophecy failed and the members emerged, Hardyck and Braden did not observe any intensification of proselytization. This leads them to doubt that proselytization is an essential feature of the response to failed prophecy. They document as well, however, that the disconfirmation of the prophecy had few, if any, negative consequences for the group. The Church of the True Word remained intact, as did the integrity of its leaders and beliefs. Therefore it is misleading to imply that the study refutes the theory of cognitive dissonance *per se*, as many later commentators do. Perhaps they are misled by the title of the article, but a close reading reveals that Hardyck and Braden's primary concern lies elsewhere, namely with specifying "the conditions that must obtain in the disconfirmation situation in order that the predicted proselytizing might occur" (1962: 141).

They propose two conditions: the amount of social support present within the group and the amount of ridicule the group receives from the outside world (1962: 139–40). The former condition plays an important role in the alternative social process model I am proposing for the study of instances of failed prophecy, so I will discuss it further below. At this juncture I will just highlight how this general approach lends credence to my proposal.

In seeking to explain the apparent differences between their group and The Seekers—the group Festinger *et al.* studied—Hardyck and Braden propose that "the more social support an individual receives above the minimum he needs to maintain his beliefs, the less he will have to proselyte" (1962: 139). The Seekers had fewer members than the Church of the True Word, and most of them had joined only months or even weeks before the failed prophecy. They also suffered from some internal dissension. Consequently, in line with Hardyck and Braden's reasoning, after the failure it is not surprising that they turned to proselytization to shore up the existing social support for their ideas. The Church of the True Word on the other hand was a much larger group, and the members had known each other for years, working hard together to

prepare the bomb shelters and complete other projects. They had no need to supplement the social support found within the existing group. (Stone 2000: 14 makes a similar observation.)

Addressing their second condition, Hardyck and Braden also note that the Church of the True Word happened to live in a community that not only tolerated but even supported their apocalyptic views. The Seekers, alternatively, were ridiculed by the local media and probably reached out to the larger community to compensate for this criticism (1962: 140). Hardyck and Braden's study is really about delineating what Zygmunt later called "the interactional and structural properties of millenarian collectivities" (1972: 249) and not the refutation of the theory of cognitive dissonance *per se*. It points to the role played by preexisting and emergent social processes in determining if, how, and how well a group will cope with the cognitive dissonance created by a prophetic failure—the kind of processes I specify below.<sup>5</sup>

The search for and systematic study of such processes will by-pass as well some persistent methodological hurdles that have plagued the existing discussion of cases of failed prophecy with its dependence on retesting the theory of cognitive dissonance. One additional and basic conceptual misunderstanding can be addressed only once we have a better grasp of these methodological problems.

### *Methodological Issues*

A critical survey of the diverse literature on failed prophecies reveals a number of basic methodological problems. Most obviously the conclusions of *When Prophecy Fails* are undermined by the peculiar fact that many of the members of the small group studied were actually researchers engaged in covert participant observation. As Anthony Van Fossen (1988: 194–96), Rodney Stark (1996: 220), William Sims Bainbridge (1997: 137), and others (e.g., Dawson 1999: 61, Bader 1999: 120) note, these conditions make it difficult to determine what might have happened if the group had been left on its own. Festinger *et al.*'s findings were probably subject to some "experimenter's effect." The constant

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<sup>5</sup> The same argument can be made for Matthew Schmalz's article, "When Festinger Fails: Prophecy and the Watchtower" (1994). As with Hardyck and Braden's study, the rhetorical flourish of the title is misleading. Schmalz's argument is actually about the need to improve our grasp of the conditions facilitating the survival of a failed prophecy, passed to us by Festinger *et al.*, by developing a better understanding of the role played by more complex ideological and organizational factors.

presence of new members, who were actually social scientists, may have created the illusion of greater support for Mrs. Keech's prophecy than otherwise would have seemed the case; while the continued presence of these fake participants after the prophetic failure may have ameliorated its negative consequences. The survival of the group, a core premise of Festinger *et al.*'s theory, is thus suspect.

This raises the more general question of what constitutes "survival" in these cases. When we say that most groups take the failure of prophecy in stride, what do we mean? It is hard to come by reliable information on the membership of the groups, whether historical or contemporary cases, for before and after a failure of prophecy. Speculation is the norm, and in most cases attention is restricted to the time immediately preceding and following the prophetic event. This time frame is too limited. In some situations, for a variety of reasons, the impact of a failure of prophecy may be deferred. The synchronic character of most case studies, then, is a second methodological limitation leading to some confusion.

Third, the comparative framework of individual case studies is usually too small as well, with researchers commonly comparing their results with only a few other well-known studies. This has perpetuated an overly simplistic reading of the factors involved in determining how groups might respond to prophetic failures.

Thus the analytical framework employed in most studies needs to be expanded in at least three ways: (1) we need better membership data; (2) we need to use longer time frames; and (3) we need to undertake more elaborate comparative analyses.

As noted, few groups disintegrate after a prophetic disconfirmation. But it is far from clear that The Seekers actually "survived," hence Festinger *et al.*'s study set a misleading precedent. Mrs. Keech's devotees were few in number, their ranks were artificially swelled by the participation of covert researchers, and no new coverts were won over to the cause after the predicted disaster and alien rescue failed to occur. In fact, as the epilogue of *When Prophecy Fails* recounts, the group "dispersed" within a week of the final prophetic disappointment and pretty much ceased to exist in less than a month. This fact seems to be consistently forgotten in the research literature.

In other instances, such as the Church of the True Word (Hardyck and Braden 1962) or the Rouxists (Van Fossen 1988), we do not know what really happened because we lack the kind of diachronic data on membership and later group activities required to make a sound judgment. Many groups seem to survive a prophetic failure quite well, but is

there damaging fallout farther down the line? In the few instances where a more longitudinal view is available—such as the Jehovah's Witnesses (e.g., Zygmunt 1970, Wilson 1978, Singelenberg 1988, Schmalz 1994), the Lubavitch Hasidim (e.g., Shaffir 1995, Dein 1997, 2001, 2002; Dein and Dawson, 2008), the Davidians (Newport 2006), the Unarians (Tuminia 2005), the Baha'is Under the Provisions of the Covenant (Balch *et al.* 1983, Balch *et al.* 1997), Chen Tao (Wright and Greil, this volume), and The Church Universal and Triumphant (Whitsel 2003; Prophet 2009; Dawson and Whitsel, this volume)—the data available are still too spotty and the status of the group is a matter of dispute.

Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, suffered some setbacks after each of their many failed prophecies (in 1878, 1881, 1914, 1918, 1925, and 1975), but the group rebounded each time and continues to thrive. Focusing on the lost membership (though temporary), Stark and Iannaccone (1997: 142–44) and Bader (1999: 122–23) use the experience of the Jehovah's Witnesses to refute the Festinger thesis. Focusing on the resilience of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Zygmunt (1970), Wilson (1978), Schmalz (1994), and (Voas 2008) argue the opposite.<sup>6</sup> Who is right?

There is little agreement, then, on the appropriate parameters of the study of instances of failed prophecy, even when relatively more reliable and longitudinal data are available. In every case it is difficult to establish a convincing causal linkage between the specific prophetic event and later developments, which in fact may be repercussions of the failure (e.g., see Wright and Greil, and Dawson and Whitsel in this volume). With the passage of time other events and factors come into play, complicating the analysis. There may be leadership rivalries or financial crises, clashes with external authorities, or any number of others developments, making it difficult to determine the balance of responsibility of either these kinds of pre-existing or later problems, or the impact of a failed prophecy or prophecies on the fate of a group. This is a fourth methodological reason for some confusion in the study of instances of failed prophecy. The sheer size and complexity of many of the groups in question (e.g., the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Lubavitch) compounds this problem, as does the diversity of the motivations members have for participating, and the sophistication of their ideological resources to facilitate creative responses.

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<sup>6</sup> David Voas (2008) generally supports the view that the Jehovah's Witnesses weathered the failed predictions well, while providing an alternative and more comprehensive reason for declines they have experienced in membership.



All these problems are affected by a fifth and final methodological issue: the heavy reliance on retrospective accounts, and what's more, accounts of past emotions and states of mind. The methodological dilemmas posed by this situation are not unique to this context. On the contrary, they are endemic to qualitative research in the social sciences (Dawson 1994) and particularly conspicuous in the assessment of the veracity of people's explanations of their past participation in religious activities of a controversial nature (Beckford 1978, Turner 1978, Wallis and Bruce 1983, Dawson 1994, Dawson and Whitsel in this volume). To what extent can we trust people's descriptions of their own actions, especially their past actions, when everyday life, history, the social sciences, and the law reveal there is much potential for inaccuracy and deception (including self-deception). The limitations are obvious with historical case studies (e.g., early Christians, Shabbateanism, the Millerites), but things are almost as problematic for contemporary ones. It is hard to acquire enough accounts of sufficient detail, and the accounts can conflict. If investigators secure divergent accounts, asserting or discounting the significance of a failed prophecy in causing later problems, who is to be believed? Which point of view should be accorded greater interpretive significance and on what basis? Which informants and what information is more reliable and why? Arguments can be fashioned to support one position over another. This is what historians and biblical exegetes often do. But the situation is more complex and challenging than the literature on failed prophecy has acknowledged, let alone treated in a sound methodological way.

In an attempt, I suspect, to introduce a greater appearance of rigor to their analysis on the model of classic scientific experiments, Festinger *et al.* set the five conditions to their thesis indicated earlier (1956: 3–6). At first glance these conditions appear to introduce a commendable specificity to the argument, but closer scrutiny reveals little real benefit. When pressed, however, this strategy reveals a sixth methodological problem: These conditions are rarely satisfied in the complex and ambiguous circumstances of real cases. Outside observers normally know little about the precise nature of participants' convictions, especially in advance of the failure. Most prophecies involve some ambiguous language or conditional phrasing that makes it difficult to say whether they are open to "unequivocal refutation," no matter what happens. In addition, we usually lack the kind of first-hand information required to determine if the presumed failure was indeed "recognized" by the participants.

The latter point has been stressed in slightly different ways by many analysts. In addition to the methodological hurdle of figuring out what participants were really thinking, it has been argued that outside observers tend to fixate too much on the failure of specific prophecies in detachment from the ways in which believers grasp those prophecies. For the believers the prophecies are part and parcel of their larger commitments to an encompassing ideology, a leader, and a system of daily practices (e.g., Zygmunt 1972, Melton 1985: 19–21, Balch *et al.* 1997, Dawson 1999: 75–78, McGhee 2005: 206–07, 217 n. 46). By lifting the prophecies out of context, social scientists tend to magnify artificially the significance of these specific events. When the prophecies are located in the more comprehensive network of beliefs, activities, and interactions that constitute the participant's definition of the situation, the resilience of believers is less surprising. Gordon Melton, for instance, writes:

Understanding that millennial groups are not organized around a single or single set of prophecies makes a significant difference in one's observation of them. If a prediction is the organizing principle of a group, its failure logically would be fatal to the group. But observation does not suggest that groups generally disintegrate after an error of prediction. If a prediction comes within a context of broad belief and group interaction, then its nonfulfillment provides a test for the system and for the personal ties previously built with the group. Times of testing tend to strengthen, not destroy, religious groups (1985: 19).

Strong social forces are at work fostering a consonance that is highly resistant to even the clear recognition of a discrepancy. In other words, in most instances it may be misleading to think in terms of an acknowledged defeat followed by a process of rationalization designed to offset a specific experience of dissonance. The processes of dissonance management characteristic of all religious groups, especially deviant or stigmatized ones, are working throughout to blunt the recognition of an unequivocal refutation (Prus 1976, Dawson 1999)—at least that is the reasonable speculation, for once again we lack the kind of data needed to know with any certainty what is happening.

Most of these criticisms lead us to realize that the study of failed prophecies cannot sensibly be done in detachment from broader reflection on the nature and functioning of prophecies in religious groups generally. This realization raises in turn the necessity of systematically identifying the possible relationships between prophecies and other basic aspects of religious life such as leadership, recruitment, sustaining commitment, coping with opposition, doctrinal development, and

organizational change, to name a few other aspects of religious group life. Broadening our perspective also brings to light certain more fundamental conceptual limitations of the dominant focus on cognitive dissonance theory in studies of failed prophecy.

### *Even More Fundamental Problems*

Extending this last line of criticism, the entire theory of cognitive dissonance can be called into question by arguing that what is “dissonant” in any situation is socially constructed. As Robert Prus observes:

While the degree of importance attributed to a discrepancy is critical vis-à-vis dissonance-reduction motivation, the intensity of any dissonance is not an intrinsic quality of the discrepancy in question, but is a problematic and negotiable subjective assessment, reflecting one’s cultural experiences, specific referent and contact [with] others, and immediate/anticipated interests (1976: 133).

This introduces a seventh and final methodological problem because what is or is not dissonant, as well as the degree of dissonance experienced, is in many ways clearly relative and perspectival. It is not a matter of simple logic or reason, as the theory of cognitive dissonance seems to assume. It is far too simple, we now realize, to say: “There is usually no mistaking the fact that [the predicted events] did not occur and the believers know that. In other words, the unequivocal disconfirmation does materialize and makes its impact on the believers” (Festinger *et al.* 1956: 5). The case literature starkly reveals that insiders and outsiders do not think alike in this regard (e.g., Shaffir 1995, Balch *et al.* 1997, Tumminia 2005). Thus, in the last analysis, the real Achilles’ heel of the theory is our “inability to measure dissonance or its reduction” (McGhee 2005: 217 n. 46), at least in a consistent manner in naturalistic settings. This fundamental stumbling block to applying the theory has not been widely recognized in the literature on failed prophecies, as is the case with a number of other fundamental ambiguities.<sup>7</sup>

Festinger *et al.*, for example, operate on the premise that failed prophecies create dissonance, which seems reasonable, but as argued elsewhere (Dawson 2002: 95–96; cf. Stone 2009: 82, 84–86), it is equally true that

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<sup>7</sup> Zygmunt (1972: 247) did treat this issue in his theoretical analysis, noting the folly of assuming that “reality testing is the sole, the main, or the ultimate basis upon which prophecies and associated beliefs are either sustained or challenged.” In part this is because “empirical evidence—the evidence of the senses—and even the testimony of common sense are often quite ambiguous and subject to alternative interpretations.”

leaders promulgate prophecies, especially apocalyptic ones, either to create dissonance where little or none existed before or to distract their followers from experiences or situations of mounting dissonance. Prophecies, and perhaps even their failure, can be used by astute or just desperate charismatic leaders to boost levels of commitment and degrees of consonance in a group, at least relatively, in the face of such things as, ironically, a failed campaign of proselytization. In fact, it might even be argued that Mrs. Keech was using such revelations to fend off the challenge posed by another aspiring prophetic leader in her group. In any event the full equation relating prophecies and dissonance is more complicated than *When Prophecy Fails* entertains, and later researchers in their fixation on testing Festinger *et al.*, or more simply refuting the Festinger thesis, have failed to note or explore this more complex dynamic.

The investigation of the link between in-group social support and proselytizing is riddled with similar problems. In their much cited article Hardyck and Braden (1962) propose, quite reasonably, that the need to proselytize varies inversely with the amount of social support available. In other words, only those in need of social support revert to increased proselytization after a failed prophecy. Of course this understanding reverses the relationship postulated by Festinger *et al.*, though Hardyck and Braden and later commentators fail to notice this shift. The fifth and final condition of the theory of cognitive dissonance, as delineated in *When Prophecy Fails*, is that strong social support is a precondition for proselytizing to occur. "If . . . the believer is a member of a group of convinced persons who can support one another," Festinger *et al.* say, "we would expect the belief to be maintained and the believers to attempt to proselyte or to persuade nonmembers that the belief is correct." In fact they imply that if this final condition is not met, despite satisfying the other four conditions, "an individual, even though deeply convinced of a belief, may discard it in the face of unequivocal disconfirmation" (1956: 4). This is a reasonable proposition as well, and it explains why I have focused on the degree of in-group social support as the last and key factor in a social process approach to the study of instances of failed prophecies (Dein and Dawson 2008, Dawson 2011). Stone's (2000) survey of the literature implicitly stresses this latter reading of in-group social support as well.

On the face of matters, however, who is right, Hardyck and Braden or Festinger *et al.*? Or are both insights correct, since the situation is more complex than commonly recognized? The authors have over-generalized from too limited knowledge of comparative cases. They have

also over-emphasized the importance of proselytizing as a mechanism for overcoming the dissonance generated by a failure of prophecy. Study of the case literature led me to conclude that it is really the solidarity or cohesiveness of a group that most determines how well a group will survive a failure of prophecy, and proselytizing is only one option we need to understand better, out of a larger repertoire of possible strategies (Dawson 1999: 71, Dein and Dawson 2008).<sup>8</sup>

In any event, to make theoretical and empirical progress it is clear that we need to move beyond the mere testing the Festinger *et al.* thesis, while being careful not to forget, misinterpret, or malign the foundational contribution of *When Prophecy Fails*. The case literature strongly supports the essential proposition that people will hold to their beliefs in the face of disconfirmation. Yet there are some explainable exceptions where people have abandoned their commitments in the face of prophetic disappointments. The case literature largely refutes the secondary proposition that groups revert to increased proselytizing to stave off dissonance. With the exception of some groups, once again, including historically important ones, which have relied on such a strategy.

### *Theoretical Insights from Zygmunt, Dawson, and Stone*

In the end it is more important to discern what specific factors influence how groups respond to failed prophecies, as well as the corresponding role these factors play in determining whether groups “survive” prophetic failures, and how well. The case literature has gravitated to this more complex and largely sociological mode of analysis, documenting the conditions, exigencies and strategies that appear to account for the persistence of faith in the face of prophetic failure. The results, however, have been piecemeal, with only a handful of studies making seeking to bring a greater analytical order to the findings.

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<sup>8</sup> With this in mind, we can see that Melton and Festinger *et al.* are less at odds than first appears. For Melton the importance of specific prophecies, and hence their failure, is often exaggerated by commentators. Few failures have dire consequences because the focus of the believers is really the larger system of gratifying beliefs, practices and communal experiences (see Balch *et al.* 1997 as well). But Festinger *et al.* assume much the same thing in the formulation of their theory, since it is this larger social commitment that motivates the effort to deny the dissonance in the first place, because the threatened dissolution of the group is too traumatic to face. If the social commitment, the support and solidarity, is flawed or wanting, then the denial of the failure will lack the requisite force.

*Joseph Zygmunt*

In 1972 Joseph Zygmunt published the first theoretical analysis of the literature on the response to failed prophecies. With hindsight, the seminal character of his article is obvious, and everyone interested in the subject should have paid closer attention. The continued preoccupation with documenting cases and quickly framing them in terms of testing the Festinger *et al.* thesis served to obscure its reception. Zygmunt begins his assessment by offering three sound pieces of advice: (1) avoid global treatments of the phenomenon, such as cognitive dissonance; (2) pay close attention to the qualitative variations in the cases; and (3) recognize that we are dealing with a collective, not merely individual, phenomenon. The analysis of failed prophecy hinges, he argues, on undertaking a comparative approach with sufficient breadth, something the later case literature continued to neglect. This is important because:

The collective expectations about the future which are generated within millenarian groups vary greatly in their specific contents, constituent imageries, affective and motivational overtones, supportive ideologies, the nature of the actions which they inspire—all of which contribute to defining the kinds of exigencies which subsequent prophetic failures are likely to precipitate, as well as the alternatives available for trying to cope with them (1972: 246).

It is through the examination of the variations in cases that explanatory insights will come, in part because “the psycho-dynamics of collectively derived and collectively sustained expectations may turn out to be a little or a lot different from the psychodynamics of individuals considered in abstraction from one another” (1972: 248). Or as Zygmunt says more emphatically at another point: “If any resolutions of the predicament [posed by a failed prophecy] are arrived at, they are almost certain to be, first and foremost, collective and not merely individual. It is necessary, therefore, to examine the process of collective interaction among the affected individuals if one is to understand the dynamics of response to prophetic failure” (1972: 258). Hence, the study of failed prophecies should be focused on “the interactional and structural properties of millenarian collectivities” (Zygmunt 1972: 249).

Unfortunately, in his analysis Zygmunt examines only three aspects of this more sociological approach, and his analysis lacks an overarching or unifying theoretical framework. First, he discusses the “collective dimensions” of millenarian groups, noting the need to differentiate between the

likely response of loosely organized social movements and more organized collectivities. For the former he notes: "Faith may run high at the peaks of excitement and inspire extreme actions, but it may just as rapidly undergo dissipation, leading to disillusion and despair" (1972: 249). The counter-intuitive persistence of faith in the face of failure is more likely to occur with relatively organized religious groups, since their more elaborate systems of beliefs and practices "predispose converts to perceive, evaluate, and respond to situations in selective ways, which tend to be consistent with ideological premises" (1972: 250).

More cryptically, he goes on to say:

The generation and maintenance of commitment to an ideology, particularly when it deviates markedly from conventional styles of thinking, require additional provisions, however. Especially important are cultic and other means for the induction and revitalization of group solidarity, the social reinforcement of basic beliefs, the formation and sustenance of in-group identifications, and the fortification of believers against competing out-group influences.... The demise of millenarian movements in the face of prophetic failures and delays is perhaps most frequently attributable to inadequate provisions along these lines (1972: 251).

Nothing more is said, and the precise meaning is unclear. But the observation, and his discussion of the "collective dimensions" in general, are in line with three important insights generated by the ongoing study of instances of failed prophecy, surveyed above: (1) the recognition that more elaborate ideological systems offer better ideational resources for rationalizing prophetic failures; (2) the argument that the response to prophetic failures must be understood in terms of the larger context of the beliefs, commitments and activities of the believers; and (3) the suggestion that in-group social support or solidarity, hence the mechanisms that foster it, play a crucial role in whether a group will survive episodes of prophetic disconfirmation.

Second, Zygmunt examines how the different "patterns of action" encouraged or undertaken by millenarian groups impact the nature of their responses to failed prophecies. He argues, rightly, that the actions of members are consequential because they entail public affirmations of faith that strengthen commitments, introduce and shift people into new social roles, and change objective conditions—all in ways that are difficult to reverse and may affect the group's "capacities to endure" (1972: 251). He offers a preliminary analysis in terms of a scheme of four types of actions: expressive, agitational, preparatory, and interventional. In essence, he argues that as groups progress through this set of actions,

from the most common (i.e., expressive) to the least common (i.e., interventionist), they are compelled increasingly to maintain their faith in failed prophecies, since their members will be ever more heavily invested, in terms of their time, energy, and money, plus they will have burned their bridges, heightening their alienation from the rest of society.

He acknowledges in passing the "double-edged" potential of each of these types of activity (1972: 253), but does not seem to comprehend fully the analytical significance of this admission. Put simply, while on the one hand the actions work to bolster the commitment of members, buffering them against disappointment, they likewise inflate expectations, heightening the disappointment when it comes. Consequently, it is not the actions in themselves, or their variations, that determines if and how a group will survive the failure of a prophecy. Other related, and not considered, interactional and structural factors, are involved. In this regard, though, he does point out an additional dynamic that is largely overlooked in the literature: once a group has reverted to interventionial actions, of either an aggressive/revolutionary or a communitarian/withdrawal type, they are usually "beset with serious problems" (1972: 257) that can threaten the continuity of the group, undermining its capacity to cope with a prophetic failure. In other words, extending the logic of Zygmunt's argument in ways he fails to, groups that engage in more moderate kinds of preparatory actions are more likely to survive a prophetic failure. As with most things, everything hinges on striking the right balance.

Third, Zygmunt describes three alternative adaptive patterns used to mitigate the damage of prophetic failures. The first possibility he delineates is the "acknowledgment of error and organizational recycling," which entails specifying various reasons why the prophecy was not fulfilled, but holding to the belief that it soon will be. Little is really changed in the ideology or the organization of the group. "[I]n effect, [the group] reaffirms its faith in its prophetic vision and merely revises its expectations as to when it will be actualized" (1972: 260). Exhortations to "prepare" remain a prominent feature of group life.

The second possibility is the "assignment of blame and organizational redirection." Here, "specific prophetic disconfirmations are not attributed to the fallibility of human judgment in discerning the unfolding of cosmic process, but rather to natural or supernatural agencies which are believed to be responsible for deflecting, retarding, or obstructing the process" (1972: 261). The nature of the blame assigned conditions the



future actions of the group and may come to provide a new orientation. If, for example, the failure is attributed to the believers' lack of spiritual readiness, it may initiate a preoccupation with the spiritual purification and regeneration of the group, and with time the new forms of education and ritual born of this effort may become institutionalized features of the group that acquire their own significance. If the delay is attributed to a failure to gather in the elect, to prepare "potential candidates for salvation," then missionary activity may take on a new significance in the identity and the organization of the group (1972: 262). In these and other ways the group may envision itself to be taking on a more active role in bringing about the prophecy, which will increase militancy and reinforce belief in the original prophecy.

The third adaptive mode Zygmunt labels the "assertion of prophecy-fulfilling claims and organizational transformation." In this scenario a group will assert that the prophecy or prophecies have been fulfilled, at least partially. To this end an explanation will be offered that reinterprets reality in ways that conform to "the symbolic-interactional framework that has come to be developed by the believing group." The claim may appear absurd or blatantly untrue to outsiders, but this will not matter to the insiders since the believers' "consensually validated, and ideologically anchored" worldview has "become an important sources of 'autonomous' influence upon group responses to prophetic failures." These "prophecy-validating claims . . . typically assert that prophesized events, or developments relating to them, have indeed occurred, but on the supernatural level, their earthly materialization being more imminent than ever" (1972: 264). With time this adaptive mode can result in a shift in the identity of the group, as it stops "seeing itself as a movement having a temporary mission," and instead conceives itself as a more permanent "organizational link between the supernatural and earthy phases of the millennial drama" (1972: 265).

One final and very helpful insight emerged from Zygmunt's analysis: "prophetic disconfirmation and nonconfirmation are among the most important causes of millenarian movement disintegration, but they are also an extremely important part of the process through which such movements undergo institutionalization" (1972: 265). Coping with failures introduces changes to the beliefs and organization of groups that can, ironically, help to perpetuate them and hence their prophecies.

*Lorne Dawson*

In 1999 I undertook a survey of the literature on instances of failed prophecy with an eye to rationalizing the discourse by detecting and clarifying common findings and patterns. I examined seventeen studies dealing with thirteen different millenarian groups. Most of these case studies had been published since Zygmunt's overview, yet no one had attempted to integrate them into the kind of broader comparative analysis he advocated. Rather each study made selective comparisons with a handful of others that dealt with issues of particular relevance to the case in question. Little or no serious consideration was given to Zygmunt's more systematic treatment of the issues. Instead, their attention remained focused on testing Festinger's cognitive dissonance thesis. Fairly consistently, however, their dissatisfaction with Festinger *et al.* led these studies into more sociological analyses of the means by which groups survive the failure of prophecy. The psycho-logic of dissonance management was being complemented by an investigation of the more complex social factors and processes involved in the collective "management of dissonance." My article sought to document, clarify and argue the merits of this focal shift; a shift that embodied the gist of Zygmunt's recommendations, even if his work was rarely cited.

The comparative analysis of the case studies revealed that most groups do readily survive the failure of prophecy, in line with Festinger *et al.*'s expectations. In fact I found only one instance of a failure to survive (Palmer and Finn 1992), but the reasons for surviving were more complex and variable than Festinger *et al.* anticipated, and increased proselytizing played a significant role in only a few cases. Alternatively, the studies revealed that there were at least three main adaptational strategies: proselytization, rationalization, and reaffirmation. Of these, as Melton (1985: 21) and others had stressed, rationalization appeared to be the primary and most consequential. But the success of any rationalization often hinged, as Melton argued—and Palmer and Finn (1992), Shafir (1995), and others demonstrated—on combining the rationalization with a set of ritualistic and educational activities designed to reaffirm the basic beliefs and practices of the group. In these ways, as Zygmunt anticipated, the groups effected both a subtle reinterpretation of reality and some measure of necessary institutional change and development. To this day, however, the analysis of this strategy of reaffirmation remains undeveloped, in comparison with the relatively rich data available on the rationalization of failed prophecies. Data on the latter,

as a component of the ideology of groups under study, can be retrieved more readily from the documentary records and recollections of the group. One can trace, after a manner, the history of the rationalizations invoked and their effects.

My article offered a fourfold classification of the types of rationalization described in the case literature: a prophetic failure was either interpreted as a "test of faith," or the result of some kind of "human error," or "blamed on others" in some way, or denied and explained with a "spiritualized" account that claimed at least a partial success for the prophecy (as suggested by Zygmunt). In fact, confirming Melton's conjecture, the comparative analysis revealed that the spiritualization of a failure was by far the most common and effective adaptational strategy, though often used in conjunction with one of the other types of rationalizations. But it also revealed that the success of this strategy depended on additional variables, such as the prompt response of leaders to the crisis of confidence set off by the failure. Leaders in the most successful groups were quick to respond, inventing plausible spiritualizations which they worked hard to disseminate, as authoritatively as possible, to as many of the members as possible, no matter how dispersed they were. Failure to do so usually meant the dissonance was not resolved, and membership declines and dissension ensued.

"Decisive leadership," then, appears to be one of many conditions that influence whether the adaptational strategies will work sufficiently. I isolated six such "influencing conditions": the others are "level of in-group social support," the "scope and sophistication of the ideology," the "vagueness of the prophecy," the "presence of ritual framing," and various "organizational factors." After describing how some of these conditions are discussed in the case literature, I offered the hope that my analytical ordering of the findings would help to future case studies "to proceed in a more focused and cumulative manner" (1999: 75). The fact that most groups take the failure of prophecy "more or less in stride," I concluded,

... suggests, as intimated by Zygmunt, van Fossen, and Palmer and Finn, that prophecies and their failures should be placed in the larger analytical context of the transformation and institutionalization of religious organizations. More specifically, following the suggestion of Robert Prus, I think prophetic failures might best be seen as one dramatic instance of a more pervasive aspect of all religious life, if not life in all groups and organizations: the interactive and collective management of dissonance (1999: 76).

This initial framework has been modified in later work (Dein and Dawson 2008, Dawson 2011) to facilitate discerning and analyzing the generic social processes of dissonance management in millenarian groups. This development is summarized in the last part of this chapter. First, however, I need to discuss briefly Jon Stone's analytic contributions to the field, noting his own convergence with this objective.

### *Jon Stone*

In another more discursive overview of the case literature, Stone (2000) arrives at the same basic conclusions: though Festinger *et al.* have been criticized heavily, the central thesis of *When Prophecy Fails* holds true, "people tend to respond to failed prophecy in ways that reaffirm their faith." Nevertheless, "active proselytizing ... is but one of a range of ways by which believers attempt to reduce dissonance," and not a way pursued by most groups (2000: 4, 8). In most instances, as Stone reiterates, rationalizations, particularly spiritualizations, are the preferred means of countering dissonance. In line with Zygmunt, and citing Balch *et al.* (1997), he further observes that after several prophetic disconfirmations, the rank and file of millenarian groups often develop a culture of dissonance reduction or management that marginalizes new prophecies in favor of a renewed focus on the larger belief-system and identity of the group. This development is often facilitated by the successful implementation of a rationalization entailing spiritualization, which can become institutionalized as a reason for heightened commitment to the work of the group, including proselytizing in some instances (2000: 10–14). The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Lubavitch are good examples of this pattern of development. When this happens, the analytical distinction between rationalizations and the process of reaffirmation is blurred, since the one becomes the foundation, through institutionalization, for the other.

Stone does not explicitly note this connection, but it is implied by his discussion. The inference is bolstered, moreover, by his further observation that success may not be the point of proselytizing after a prophetic failure. Rather, the activity may have an intrinsic value for the believers. "Evangelizing ... serves a function somewhat akin to a motivational pep rally that a team of athletes (or politicians) holds in the wake of a stunning defeat: it boosts flagging morale and restores confidence in the truth of the message and messenger" (2000: 6, Stone 2009: 75–76). In other words, proselytizing may become, or in fact is, a mode of reaffirmation as well.

In general, as Stone notes:

[T]he social and cultural [i.e., ideological] responses to prophetic failure work in tandem in virtually all successful cases of dissonance reduction.... [T]he spiritualization of a "failed" prophecy does not take hold or work until there are the necessary social supports upon which disappointed and discouraged members can lean. In the same way, social support, while crucial, is not sufficient to assuage disappointment unless the failed prophecy, in turn, can be reinterpreted within the context of the group's overall system of beliefs. The process appears to build upon itself (2000: 17; see also 2009: 80).

In a later essay Stone (2009) issues a strong call for moving beyond Festinger *et al.*, but not because they are wrong. Rather, like myself (1999, 2011), he thinks there is little more to be gained by reiterating tests of the theory, and this tendency has artificially narrowed the field of study. A close reading of *When Prophecy Fails*, of the whole story of The Seekers, he argues, reveals other issues to explore. First, he states, while Festinger *et al.* focused exclusively on the dissonance caused by failed prophecies, it can be argued that prophecies are both issued and accepted as a means of resolving some pre-existing sense of dissonance, of providing consonance to alienated individuals by giving a greater meaning to their lives and uniting them with like-minded people (2009: 84).

Second, Stone argues that endtime prophecies must be understood in the larger context of our knowledge of the functioning of prophecies in religious groups in general. In line with the first point, it would then be recognized that most prophecies involve oracular pronouncements on the state of the world and the desires of supernatural forces for changes in our behavior. "That is to say," he writes (2009: 85), "prophets, in uttering their 'word of the Lord,' are offering solutions to existing dissonance or dissonances that group members have been experiencing." In this context, when prophecies of doom are proclaimed they are received quite readily by believers and are less shocking than they appear to nonbelievers, because a culture of expectation has been cultivated that accommodates them. If, in these circumstances, a millennial prediction is disruptive, then given the overall functioning of prophecies, he continues, we might well ask "what larger purpose does such turmoil serve?" Building on this thought, Stone also wonders how the internal rivalry of several oracles with The Seekers may have affected the relative consonance of the group, and hence have prompted, presumably Mrs. Keech's predictions of a pending catastrophe. In the end, he concludes (2009: 86), "It is not enough to continue to ask 'What hap-

pens when prophecy fails?’ What is of greater interest is why prophetic movements exist and continue to exist and how the interplay between prophets and people appears to create a world in which the dissonance that believers experience in their earthly lives is relieved, if only temporarily.” In other words, Stone, too, would like to see the failed prophecy dialogue transmute into a more profitable analysis of the role of prophecy in the interactive and collective management of dissonance in religious groups.

### *A New Social Process Approach*

Seeking to bring greater order to analyses of failed prophecy in a way that would better integrate these findings into the broader study of the full range of social activities in millenarian movements, I have argued (Dein and Dawson 2008, Dawson 2011) that the ability of groups to implement dissonance management strategies successfully, and hence perpetuate themselves, is determined by four social processes: (1) the degree to which members are socialized to the prophetic process and expectations; (2) the degree to which members are motivated or compelled to engage in costly preparations; (3) the degree to which leaders respond swiftly and thoroughly to apparent failures; and (4) the degree of in-group social support present in the group. The variations in instances of failed prophecy, which Zygmunt rightly emphasizes should be the focal point of the kinds of comparative analyses that are the method for advancing our knowledge, are the result of differences in both the sheer presence or degree of these four processes and in the ways they are achieved or enacted.

Each process involves several identifiable sub-processes and variables that are worthy of study in their own right. This complexity should not be viewed as a deterrent to using this framework; it simply provides a more accurate reflection of social life. The basic fourfold formulation is simple and clear enough. The requisite clarity is achieved by holding to the established and quite natural focus of the existing literature on the instrumental question of determining how groups survive the failure of prophecy, why some do so better than others, and why occasionally a few fail to survive. In this regard, the approach maintains a measure of continuity with Festinger *et al.* and the agenda set by their original five conditions. It is, as Stone says, “Festinger-inspired research” (2009: 88), but this characterization is also misleading since

the focus is wholly social. It is the “interactional and structural properties” of the group and not the behavioral propensities of individuals that are relevant. In this more crucial sense, the approach is Zygmunt-inspired.

Current analyses of instances of failed prophecy proceed with little in common, at least explicitly, other than their reference to the theory of cognitive dissonance, which is of limited assistance in advancing our understanding. The core truth of cognitive dissonance theory undergirds the more comprehensive sociological approach advocated here, where an examination of the four processes allows for the systematic consideration of many, if not all, of the other lasting insights from the research—with regard, for example, to the adaptive strategies used—while calling attention to the full range of influencing conditions from the moment the prophecy is spoken to the struggle to cope with its failure. Striking the right balance of simplicity and complexity facilitates using the framework, which clearly deals with some of the most basic interactional and structural properties of all millenarian collectivities, to make more systematic comparisons across cases, without sacrificing due regard for the role of more idiosyncratic historical and cultural factors in individual cases.

The merits of this approach have been demonstrated substantively elsewhere, through an examination of the first and fourth processes (i.e., preparation of the prophetic milieu and in-group social support) in the case of the Lubavitch Hasidim (Dein and Dawson 2008; Dawson 2011), and the third, and to some extent second, processes (i.e., the response of leaders and the investment in preparations) in the case of the Church Universal and Triumphant (Dawson and Whitsel, this volume), as well as the Mission de l'Esprit Saint and the early Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas (Dawson 2011). Here I will limit my final comments to delineating the logic by which this approach grew out the generalizable findings of the case literature.

Most groups survive the failure of prophecy and do so quite well, but only a few revert to increased proselytizing. All groups rely on some combination of rationalizations to sustain themselves. The most effective response involves the use of some form of spiritualization in conjunction with reaffirmation rituals and activities. This requires effective leadership, not just to realize and institute this strategy, but to do so promptly, with sufficient authority, and wide enough dissemination (see Dawson and Whitsel, this volume). In itself, though, this response may be meaningless and ineffective if two background conditions are not in place: the

group must be thoroughly socialized to prophecy, hence receptive to new claims, and there must be sufficient in-group social support to sustain the appeal and credibility of the group's overall goals and activities in the face of ridicule from without and doubt and dissension within. The real job of the prophetic leader is to establish, maintain and renew the grounds of satisfaction and commitment in the group. The likelihood of weathering a failure of prophecy is proportionate, however, to the extent of the membership's preparations for the predicted event. There is strong motivation, both psychologically and practically, for people to stand by their investments. Whether and how they do is variant from case to case, depending of a long list of potential influencing conditions, ranging from the strength of the leader's charismatic authority to the scope and sophistication of the group's ideology, or its orientation to the rest of society (i.e., communal withdrawal versus revolutionary activism), or level of organization. Features of the preparations undertaken and the very location of the group, among many other things, also may be important. Drafting lists of possible factors, however, is of little explanatory value in itself. Plausible causal associations must be made between influencing conditions and the more invariant social processes or functions of millenarian groups.

As Zygmunt noted, all of the factors and processes identified are, hypothetically, "double-edged." The more people invest in the preparations for a predicted event, for example, the more they are reluctant to walk away in the wake of a disconfirmation. But equally, the more they invest the more the failure is magnified, or they may be compelled to abandon the cause because their resources are depleted. It is the dialectical interplay of processes, and of processes with conditions, that ultimately determines, however, which way the wind will blow. No one factor is decisive.

The systematic study of the four processes involved in every instance of failed prophecy provides a simple yet sufficiently comprehensive, diachronic and flexible framework for considering the many variables involved, while maintaining a focus on the patterns of interaction that are decisive in determining how things will pan out. In other words, the processual approach conforms with the three most important conclusions to emerge from the research into failed prophecies so far: first, it emphasizes the social and collective nature of the phenomenon; second, it treats the response to the failure of prophecy as part of the broader collective management of dissonance; and in doing these it delineates finally the role played by making prophecies and coping with their failures in the



transformation and institutionalization of millenarian movements. In these ways, returning to where we began, the study of failed prophecy can help to lay the foundations for the phenomenology of prophecy.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, as this chapter argues, a number of basic methodological issues persist: the need for better membership data, and longitudinal data, and for ameliorating the problems posed by tracing a causal link between prophetic failures to later organizational developments, relying on retrospective accounts, and the relative character of what is "dissonant."

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### WHEN PROPHETS FAIL TO FAIL: A CASE STUDY OF YUKO CHINO, *CHINO SHOHO*, AND THE PANA-WAVE LABORATORY

SALVADOR JIMENEZ MURGUIA

This chapter documents the irresolution of the prophetic claims of Yuko Chino by her Japanese contactee religion Chino Shoho (Chino's True Law) and its vanguard group, dubbed by the English-speaking media as the Pana-Wave Laboratory (PWL). The research was conducted between early 2003 and late 2007 in Fukui, Japan. Through participant observation I interviewed, photographed and video-taped these subjects during field visits to the PWL compound. When I could not be present at the compound, I continued correspondence through email and telephone calls from the United States. The majority of these correspondences were in English.

Yuko Chino served as the principal contactee for Chino Shoho. Contactees communicate with extraterrestrials. Sociologist Diana G. Tumminia (2007: xxix) defines a contactee religion as "an organized following around a contactee mystic ... [that] exhibit[s] strong mythological components, usually derived from the visionary pronouncements of the leader and in some cases from trusted followers." Yuko Chino mirrors such female prophets as Mrs. Keech who predicted a rescue through flying saucers (Festinger *et al.* 1956), and the cosmic diva Uriel, who envisaged world salvation through the coming of UFOs in 2001 (Tumminia 2005). This analysis details the group's vacillation toward a resolution of the contradictions within Chino's prophecy, a scenario that touches upon the concept of cognitive dissonance as assessed by Leon Festinger *et al.* (1956). Theoretically, the discussion will examine the prophecy primarily through the lens of what social psychologists refer to as "fundamental attribution error" (Jones and Harris 1967) where, in this instance, failed prophecy is explained in dispositional, as opposed to situational, terms. In an analysis of contemporary conspiracy theories, Steve Clarke (2002: 144) explains, "Humans systematically make the error of severely overestimating the importance of dispositional factors,

as well as the concomitant error of severely underestimating the importance of situational factors, when seeking to understand and explain the behavior of others.”

### *The Prophet*

Yuko Chino was born Hidemi Masuyama on January 26, 1934 in Kyoto, Japan. In 1942, Hidemi's parents divorced, and she and her mother moved to Osaka. Shortly after the divorce Hidemi's mother remarried, yet the relationship turned out to be less than pleasant. According to Hidemi, she and her mother argued constantly with the new stepfather, and the home soon became a difficult environment in which to live. In her *Kingdom of Heaven's Series*, she often noted that this was not only a forced living situation, but also a very difficult upbringing that would keep her reserved and out of social settings (Chino 1980: 2–4).

As a young woman, Hidemi studied English at a junior college, becoming proficient in reading, writing and speaking. However, according to Hidemi, this was a depressing time where she endured a number of unfortunate experiences including spiritual encounters with demons, multiple suicide attempts, and hospitalizations. On the outside, her neighbors noticed Hidemi's disillusionment, remembering her as somewhat of an eccentric female who would wander naked through the streets at night talking to the sky.

Although Hidemi's mother was a Christian, and Hidemi herself was baptized and attended church regularly (Chino 1980: 7), her mother sought other spiritual affiliations in an effort to understand her daughter's behavior (Chino 1980: 3–4). With the help of her mother, Hidemi sampled a number of religious movements eventually settling in as a member of the God Light Association (GLA), led by the well-known charismatic figure Shinji Takahashi (1927–1976). By the 1970s, Hidemi Masuyama had become a prominent member of this new religious movement, and in attempt to redefine herself she began fashioning her name to Yuko Chino.

When Takahashi died in 1976, several splinter sects were created—one of which, Chino Shoho, was founded by Yuko Chino. By 1977, she had acquired a considerable following out of the former GLA loyalists, and she formed an eclectic spiritualism that adopted doctrines from the Abrahamic religions, Hindu and Buddhist folk traditions, Theosophy, New Age ideology, and parapsychology, as well as a host of pseudo-

scientific conjectures about physics, environmental warfare and space exploration. Yuko Chino claimed to possess mystic powers of clairvoyance, even communicating with the late Pope John Paul II and Audrey Hepburn, as well as several extraterrestrial beings that purportedly made visits to our universe in spaceships. In her clairvoyant rituals, she would channel supernatural beings and draft manuscripts documenting the experiences.

### *The Group*

Exploring the social dimensions of good versus evil, Yuko Chino shifted her attention toward the Cold War and her perceived threat of communism. Focusing primarily on the former USSR, Yuko Chino alleged that she was the target of a conspiracy to have her tortured and assassinated through electromagnetic wave warfare. According to Yuko Chino, the Soviets transmitted harmful electromagnetic waves via generators attached to power lines and telephone poles throughout Japan.<sup>1</sup> At one point, Yuko Chino believed that the USSR would invade Japan, and in 1982, she advised her following to leave Japan for the United States. Although Yuko Chino never actually left, several of her followers did leave, living for a number of years in Southern California.

As the Cold War waned around 1991, this alleged assault apparently intensified, and in a peculiar twist Yuko Chino commissioned an intellectual vanguard to research the negative effects of these electromagnetic scalar waves. This vanguard became known as the Pana-Wave Laboratory (PWL), and their mission would be to prolong Yuko Chino's life through the scientific analysis of electromagnetic wave weaponry. "Pana-Wave Laboratory" was actually a name given to the group by an English magazine. The original name in translation was "Pana-Wave Research Center." The actual name is *Pana-Wave Denpa Kenkyuujo* (Pana-Wave Electromagnetic Wave Research Center). The following selection summarizes PWL's mission (Pana-Wave Research Laboratory 2001: 11):

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<sup>1</sup> Electromagnetic waves refer to radiation that materializes in several different types of self-propagating frequencies such as infrared radiation, microwaves, radio waves, terahertz radiation, and x-rays. Yuko Chino came to refer to electromagnetic waves through a loosely associated designation for a physical quantity known as scalar frequencies. As both electromagnetic waves and scalar waves were used interchangeably by Yuko Chino, I have done so as well throughout this chapter.



*Fig. 5.1. Aerial View of Arcadia (2004). Photo: Salvador Murguia.*

After the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the scalar wave weapon proliferated, to be employed by the extreme leftist groups in Japan. They utilized the scalar wave technology by illegally altering and installing devices on the power transmission lines to mind control the masses, and to assassinate conservative citizens. Furthermore, it became clear that the harmful properties of the scalar wave, radiated from looped coils, was exerting a lethal impact on biological systems, to include human beings, as its side effect. The destruction of the environment such as anomalous weather and gravity anomalies were also brought about by excessive amount of the scalar wave.

Surrounded by the Pana-Wave Laboratory atop Gotaishi Mountain, Yuko Chino lived in the seclusion of her van, named Arcadia, where she transmitted her communiqués to the PWL via short-wave radio. Toward the end of her life, Yuko Chino actually never left Arcadia, opting instead to depend upon a caretaker to facilitate any interaction she had with the rest of the group.

Working on a daily basis to prevent these electromagnetic wave attacks, the PWL members believed such waves had compromised their own health and safety. In this way, they resolved to produce certain preventive measures that resulted in a spectacle of sorts for the Japanese



*Fig. 5.2. Aerial View of PWL Compound (2005). Photo: Salvador Murguía.*

media. The most notable of these measures was the appearance of PWL members. According to the PWL, the color white best serves to deflect electromagnetic scalar waves. In an attempt to deflect electromagnetic wave attacks, the PWL clothed themselves in all white uniforms consisting of laboratory jackets and pants, head and mouth coverings, and rubber boots, as well as similar coverings on bodily-related accessories, such as eyewear and watches.

In addition to the PWL members' personal appearance, members also erected a physical compound that they referred to as their research laboratory. This all-white structure included surrounding riverbanks and trees shrouded in white sheets, white vans, and mirrors reflecting this wash of white in all directions. Inside of the laboratory, the PWL's popular version of scientific research was acted out—complete with PWL members as lab gowned scientists and equipped with a variety of gadgets resembling a scene one might find in a chemistry laboratory. This incorporation of a scientific component demonstrates Christopher Partridge's notion of the "physicalist" influence (2003: 22), where religious groups integrate a version of popular science as an accompanying feature in resolving this-worldly problems.



*Prophecy*

In April 2003, Chino Shoho and the PWL began a caravan journey around the Honshu island area of Japan. Influenced by the belief that electromagnetic wave generators were attached to telephone and electric poles, the group considered this rural destination ideal for evading perceived communist attacks. Slowly winding through the mountainous regions of the Gifu and Fukui prefectures, the all-white-16-van caravan and their 52-member-PWL-foot escort heightened the anxiety of a Japan still very much in a state of recovery from 1995's Aum Shinrikyo poison-gas attack on the Tokyo subway line. Benjamin Dorman (2005) wrote that the heightened sense of residual fear about Aum Shinrikyo developed into a moral panic against PWL's cult image by the police and media.

In combination with information gathered about the Soviet conspiracy, Yuko Chino began to prophesy about a planet named "Nibiru" and the dangers of its approach toward Earth's orbit. According to Yuko Chino, on May 15, 2003, Nibiru's encroachment would reverse magnetic poles and cause massive earthquakes and tidal waves, a disaster scenario that would leave no survivors. In an attempt to legitimize her claims, Yuko Chino cited evidence that had literally floated into the coastal waters of eastern Japan. During August 2002, an Arctic bearded seal appeared in the murky Tama River of Tokyo, a river known for its heavy pollution. The seal immediately gained media attention, receiving the affectionate name "Tama-chan" for the river in which it temporarily made a home. According to Yuko Chino, Tama-chan's waywardness showed that even animals were experiencing the disorienting effects of the coming magnetic axis shift.

Acting upon Yuko Chino's concerns, PWL members devised a plot to rescue Tama-chan from the polluted surroundings. Forming the *Tama-chan o mamoru kai*, or "The Group that Thinks about Tama-chan," PWL members reportedly built makeshift pools to accommodate the rescued seal at a location separated from the Fukui compound and leased by the PWL. Though the rescue attempt actually failed, the PWL received even more unsolicited attention when the Japanese media misconstrued the event as a kidnapping attempt (Dorman 2005: 92–93).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tama-chan's popularity eventually faded after the seal disappeared in late 2003. After resurfacing in 2004, Tama-chan is reportedly living under closed-circuit television surveillance in the Arakawa River of Tokyo.

*Doomsday: May 15, 2003*

Less than six months after the Tama-chan incident, the PWL was again at the center of media attention, when police officials raided their caravan facilities on May 14, 2003—one day prior to the doomsday prediction. In full view of the media, some 300 police investigators searched the PWL vans and 11 other affiliated operations throughout Japan. When this was completed, however, the police managed to collect evidence that led only to minor vehicle citations for falsely registered vans.

As members prepared for the end, the popular media in Japan staged an unprecedented display of reporting by inundating Gotaishi area with news vans and press equipment. Aside from this media spectacle, the actual day might have passed uneventfully had not the Japanese authorities raided the group's living quarters. The May 15th date came and went without further incident. No colossal earthquakes, tsunamis, or magnetic polar shifts took place. As the Japanese media looked on, no spectacular communiqués came from PWL. In the view of the remaining 40 faithful members of Chino Shoho, the world had simply undergone a divine reprieve. With no event to confirm Yuko Chino's prophecy, PWL members began to rationalize what had not taken place. According to one member of the PWL, the date was altered because "the gods and our chairman [Yuko Chino] did not wish for the end of Earth" (PWL member 2004a).

In what appeared to be a diversion, a spokesman for the PWL issued another doomsday prophecy for May 22, 2003. When that day came, it seemed as if very few people, even the media, were willing to follow the PWL's story. In June 2004, however, Yuko Chino sent me a memorandum which included the following prophecy: "There have been new messages revealed to us regarding a new end date. Cracks are forming on the sea floors of Japan, and at this rate Japan will sink to the bottom of the seas by spring next year" (Chino 2004a).

During the winter of that same year, Japan was bombarded by natural disasters. With earthquakes, typhoons and subsequent floods, it seemed as if a stage had been set for developing and enacting more of Yuko Chino's prophetic dramas. Continuing to prophesize about impending disasters, Yuko Chino finally began predicting a more numinous departure for the PWL in flying saucers.

*Prophecy Reorganized*

On December 13, 2004 I received a series of short memoranda addressed directly to me from Yuko Chino. She began these rather cryptic messages by informing me that “All 21 units of the UFO Fleet have crashed into the sea, as a result of shortage of food and fuel” (Chino 2004b). As explained in the following excerpt, PWL’s objective would now be to build a spacecraft of their own as a vehicle for escaping future disasters:

The Shoho Group has plans for its escape as early as next spring if preparations are complete, but if time not ripe yet (if the UFO’s needed for the escape are not yet ready) the plan is three years down the line.... It will be as early as half a year, and at most five years. On the fifth year there will be no salvation. However, if we go to build the UFO, it will be three years.... If we stay for more than three years, there will be disasters and humans will no longer be able to live. (Chino 2004b)

Yuko Chino became more and more meticulous in describing the operation by fortifying her statements in more practical terms. Here she identifies building materials necessary to construct the spacecraft, suggesting a method of finance, inviting an established scientist for support and specifying my participation in this project:

The building material for the UFO is an alloy of steel and titanium. Currently we are considering methods of where to obtain this material. [A] possible method is to accept donations to build the same UFO, so we plan to ask around the Tsudoi members for the donation of such funds. If you would be willing to participate, along with any of your friends, it would be well received. We would be more than happy if you, as a guest member of Pana-Wave, would join the members of the PW office, head of the science department, etc., with activities relating to the building or piloting. (Chino 2004b)

Though months were dedicated to this operation, PWL never completed the spacecraft nor did Yuko Chino offer any explanation of what actually occurred. However, five months later I received another series of faxed memoranda that explained a new course of action that PWL had code named “Project Circle P.” The “P” stood for “pick-up,” or a rescue mission, by a “UFO fleet” to arrive in the summer of 2005. For the PWL, this was seen as a last resort in evading another prophesied catastrophe put forth by Yuko Chino:

It started when we were made aware made of the Nibiru-related disasters. If planet Nibiru were to approach Earth, Earth would see great destruction and the possible ruin of humankind. Therefore, Yuko Chino worked with the extra-terrestrial beings that she keeps in contact with to have Shoho

Members rescued. A UFO would be arriving to “pick us up” from earth to salvage humankind and create a new civilization on a different planet. (Chino 2005b)

In addition, to this new prospect of rescue, Yuko Chino also believed that the U.S. government was involved in plan to create a new solar energy source out of Jupiter—a plan she referred to as “Project Lucifer” (Chino 2005a). According to her, this plan was a continuation of a previous attempt by the U.S. to crash a “space probe carrying 23 kg of plutonium,” into the planet (Chino 2005a). Yuko Chino warned that Project Lucifer Jupiter would make Mars into an asteroid belt and once again jeopardize Earth: “If Mars is destroyed, Jupiter’s gravity will attract Earth, inevitably causing it to approach contact with the second asteroid belt, and it is quite obvious that Earth will see catastrophe. 99 % of humans on Earth will most likely be ruined” (Chino 2005a).

Using prophetic claims such as these, the group began drawing up plans for Project Circle P. During this planning stage, Yuko Chino advised members to prepare themselves for a six-month journey into outer space. These preparations included gathering living necessities “centered on items that are less affected by gravity, such as space food, and other items instructed by PW” (Chino 2005a). The exact instructions appeared to be more geared toward salvaging animal life, as to someday reconstitute the ecological fabric of Earth:

Bring pets, such as birds, dogs, and cats, and other living things to fill the nature of the new world, including seawater fish and young fish. Needless to say, bring enough food for these animals as well. It would be appropriate to think of it as Noah’s ark, only on a UFO.... Naturally, what humans of Earth and Martians must do is transplant the nature existing currently on Earth to that planet. The science department of PW has already been instructed to prepare the seeds, plants, saplings and needless to say, food and necessities for each person. (Chino 2005a)

Though the destination was initially uncertain, after discussing travel details with the “Planetary Alliance,” Yuko Chino then stated that the group would be arriving on “Planet A.” Aside from a brief description of the rocky terrain, lakes, and the absence of flora and fauna, she provided no further information about this planet.

Through the fall of 2006, Yuko Chino and the PWL were still very much determined to leave. She continued to advise the group to prepare themselves for departure while the PWL went to work on a two-acre landing port near the research center. However, according to the PWL the departure never occurred because Yuko Chino died of cancer



*Fig. 5.3. Shrouded Trees (2005). Photo: Salvador Murguia.*

on October 25, 2006 at the age of 72. As the “Communist guerillas executed Chairman Chino we [PWL] we do not know when we will be rescued ... we will wait” (PWL member 2007). Since Yuko Chino’s death, PWL membership has dwindled to less than ten resident researchers. Despite this decline in membership, PWL has remained in operation, yet with changes in objectives, an entirely different set of operational circumstances, and a reorganization of leadership.

During a visit I made to Fukui in December 2007, I observed PWL members laying a foundation for a structure in the center of the laboratory. According to one PWL member, this structure will soon be the site of an animal sanctuary—a building that fulfills one of Yuko Chino’s final wishes.

The circumstance under which the Pana-Wave Laboratory operates has also undergone major transformations. Although Pana-Wave Laboratory research on electromagnetic waves continues to yield evidence of dangerous emissions generated by Soviets, the frequency and intensity of such attacks have decreased considerably. According to the PWL, this decreasing trend is due to the fact that Yuko Chino no longer resides at the laboratory and thus the Fukui compound is less of a target than



*Fig. 5.4. Walls of the Caravan (2003). Photo: Salvador Murguía.*

before. Given this change, PWL has relaxed its electromagnetic wave deterrence activities by removing many of the white shrouds and mirrors. In addition, members can be seen without their laboratory suits, going about less research-oriented routines such as maintaining gardens, cooking, cleaning, participating in the construction of the sanctuary, and generally tending to each others' needs. The sanctuary and gardens imply that the plan to leave Earth is less urgent than before.

Finally, the PWL leadership has undergone decentralization. Without the consistent flow of communiqués from Yuko Chino's van, PWL now takes direction from two new leaders.<sup>3</sup> One of these individuals has been member of Chino Shoho since its inception and the other since the early 1980s. Although both are equally committed to continuing the laboratory operation, the former resides in the Fukui compound, while the latter operates from a neighboring prefecture. In the face of declining membership, lack of financial resources, a total discontinuation of Yuko

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<sup>3</sup> At this point, both of these leaders wish to remain anonymous.

Chino's authored literature, and merely trivial duties for maintaining the upkeep of the animal sanctuary, the future of the Pana-Wave Laboratory appears uncertain.

### *Discussion*

Festinger and his research team hypothesized that under certain specified conditions, proselytizing and faith adherence would increase. In this way, despite wrestling with the appearance that a prophecy has failed, the strength of an individual's belief is so strong that she or he will not abandon it. The individual alone may have trouble making sense of a disconfirmation that stands discordant with his or her faith, and so instead looks to others within the same faith group for direction as only they share the same beliefs. According to Festinger *et al.*, the individual reaffirms her or his beliefs by proselytizing with others both inside and outside the group.

Since the 1956 Festinger *et al.* study, social scientists have attempted to replicate (Hardyck and Braden 1962, Sanada and Norbeck 1975, Tumminia 2005), develop (Balch *et al.* 1983, Bader 1999), or even challenge its findings to some extent (Melton 1985, Schmalz 1994). Others have re-evaluated the Festinger thesis and concluded that such prophetic phenomena can be expressed in more relative terms where adaptation to disconfirmed prophecy, as opposed to responses toward outright failure of such prophecies, is emphasized (Zygmunt 1972: 259–66, Melton 1985: 21).

Notwithstanding the variety of failed prophecy analyses conducted over the half-century since the Festinger *et al.* study, there appears to be less of a theoretical model for interpreting the cognitive errors encountered when a group deals with a failed prophecy. Rather than focusing solely upon the PWL's failed prophecy, a closer examination of the epistemological content used in explaining what "actually occurred" in place of the confirmation illustrates how Yuko Chino's prophecies rest within a rhetorical culture of unfalsifiability—a culture of producing information that simply cannot be disproved. In one case study that explored similar unfalsifiable phenomena, Tumminia (1998, 2005) conducted an ethnomethodological analysis of a contactee religion, Unarius Academy of Science, utilizing a theoretical approach introduced by Melvin Pollner as "mundane reason." According to Pollner, mundane reasoning is a way enacting, or doing, a reality wherein "[b]elief could be conceived

of as a cultural system which patterns the actions and utterances of members and is drawn upon by them as a way of ordering their projects and circumstances" (1987: 17). Tumminia argued that in the face of failed prophecy many of these Unarians maintained their beliefs through mundane reasoning in order to reaffirm their own "socially constructed logic" (1998: 158). While onlookers might have viewed such logic as rationalization of a failed prophecy, Tumminia's ethnography documented the Unarians' collective narratives that served to confirm the prophecy's fulfillment.

Similar to the reasoning exhibited by the Unarians, the PWL also reaffirmed their beliefs in the prophecies of Yuko Chino after the failure of the May 2003 doomsday prophecy by evoking logic that stood in contrast to the perceptions of Japanese onlookers. In July of the following year, one PWL member explained the prophecy, not as a failure, but instead reasoned that a "UFO Fleet put up a force field around Earth to circumvent the disasters" (PWL 2004a). Reasoning of this sort reflects PWL logic and is situated squarely within a reaffirming schema that downplays the situational failure of the prophecy and emphasizes an extraordinary explanation relative to the disposition of alleged Communist conspirators. In short, the disposition of the Soviets allegedly conspiring to assassinate Yuko Chino had indirectly destabilized the cosmic order and contributed to an impending disaster. Regardless of the generally received view that Yuko Chino's doomsday prophecy was not confirmed, that explanation was disregarded and an adapted narrative was substituted. In this way, Yuko Chino's prophecies literally fail to fail, and thus can always be considered ongoing prophecies that are not limited by their non-confirmation. This is how "fundamental attribution error" was operationalized in this case.

The Festinger *et al.* study may also be used to illustrate this phenomenon: When Mrs. Keech and her following of Seekers failed to experience the prophesized flood and the rescue by spaceships, Keech's explanation emphasized the disposition associated with the Seekers' faith as the mechanism for saving earth from destruction. The fundamental attribution error takes place when the situational factors of a physical impossibility of a disaster of that magnitude are ignored and the dispositional factors of group's faith are emphasized.

Much of the PWL members' rhetorical culture fell into this same cognitive error. The assertion that a secret conspiracy using electromagnetic warfare to brainwash Japanese citizens is organized around the disposition of any human's potential to inflict harm. However, plausibility of a



situation where time, capital and effort would be spent to this end is less likely. Clarke argues that such a cognitive error is common within the milieu of conspiracy theorizing and produces degenerative research programs. He explains: "Successful novel predictions and retrodictions are not made. Instead, auxiliary hypotheses and initial conditions are successively modified in light of new evidence, to protect the original theory from apparent disconfirmation" (2002: 136).

After the 2003 doomsday prophecy failed, one PWL member stated that the date was a mere calculation error, and a new date of May 22 was actually the correct date (Sieveking and Sutton 2003). The failure of the prophecy to materialize was attributed to a dispositional error on the part of Yuko Chino, yet a situational explanation accentuating the impossibility of a massive disaster due to Communists' modification of magnetic poles and an encroaching phantom planet was absent. "Project Circle P," devised in 2004, left PWL members in another situation where failed prophecy was dealt with in relation to the death of Yuko Chino in 2005. The irresolution of this event was also explained using this same cognitive error. PWL members recounted the death as an "execution," highlighting the disposition of nefarious Soviets as opposed to Yuko Chino's situation of failing health and old-age.

### *Conclusion*

More than fifty years after Festinger and his research team published *When Prophecy Fails*; cognitive dissonance is still an exigently relevant concept for the analysis of failed prophecy. Scholars within this area have reproduced, developed, re-structured and even challenged the findings of Festinger *et al.*, providing ample research to describe case studies of contemporary instances of the failed prophecy experience.

The present case study examines the epistemological content of PWL's attempt at dealing with failed prophecies and reveals a cognitive reliance upon the fundamental attribution error where dissonance is explained in dispositional, as opposed to situational, terms. Within the discursive tension between event-specific dissonance and consonance, the analysis of rhetorical content inclusive of this cognitive error contributes to the body of research on failed prophecies.

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## CHAPTER SIX

### LEADERSHIP AND THE IMPACT OF FAILED PROPHECIES ON NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS: THE CASE OF THE CHURCH UNIVERSAL AND TRIUMPHANT

LORNE L. DAWSON AND BRADLEY C. WHITSEL

Elizabeth Clare Prophet, the charismatic leader of the Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT), began dictating messages from the Ascended Masters El Morya and Saint Germain in early October 1986. These messages warned that the United States would soon fall victim to a first-strike nuclear attack by the Soviet Union. In a dictation from Saint Germain on Thanksgiving Day 1986, Prophet exhorted her followers to begin the construction of bomb shelters on CUT's ranch in Montana. On March 15, 1990, several thousand of CUT's members crowded into the massive shelters in order to survive this almost inevitable and cataclysmic war. As long anticipated by this group, the world as we knew it was coming to an end. Years of strenuous work and sacrifice had reached a climax, and the chosen survivors were ready to emerge from the carnage to initiate a new world order. But as the morning of March 16 broke, nothing had happened. In line with further prophecy, but without public knowledge, the experience was repeated eleven days later on March 26. Once again, though, the prophecy failed (Prophet 2009: 226–27).

Apocalyptic prophecies of this kind are common in new religious movements (hereafter NRMs). In fact, they are far more so than scholars have realized until quite recently. Overwhelmingly, these prophecies fail to come true, at least empirically. For the Church Universal and Triumphant the nuclear missiles never left their silos, and the world as we know it did not come to an end. Yet, as scholars have come to appreciate, failures of prophecy rarely have the dire consequences common sense suggests. Counter-intuitively, the majority of groups survive the disconfirmation of the predictions of their prophets, and the norm is for faith in the leaders and systems of belief to persist or even intensify—at least for a time.

In their classic study, *When Prophecy Fails*, Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter first drew attention to this unusual state of affairs, postulating the theory of cognitive dissonance to explain it. In the face of evidence contradicting a strongly held belief, Festinger and his colleagues hypothesized that people will be more inclined to find a means to discount the evidence than surrender their beliefs and commitments. They will resolve the cognitive tension they feel by seeking to change the way the world is perceived, in line with their expectations, rather than abandon their cherished convictions. More specifically, Festinger *et al.* argue, despite the contrary evidence, people will attempt to convince others of the veracity of their views on the premise that their ability to persuade others testifies to the continued worth of their beliefs. Paradoxically, they will respond to prophetic failure with intensified proselytizing. But the psychological response captured by the theory of cognitive dissonance is only the initial piece of the puzzle. Numerous later case studies (e.g., Dawson 1999, Dein and Dawson 2008, Stone 2000) have demonstrated that the fate of specific groups is largely determined by additional social factors that we have only begun to identify and explain systematically.

While many groups experience temporary set-backs after the failure of a prophecy, it is rare for groups to experience severe and long-lasting effects. CUT, however, never really recovered from the negative consequences of the disconfirmation of its apocalyptic prophecy. On every front, it sustained a significant reversal of its fortunes after this non-event. This unusual result prompts investigation. We can learn much from the study of exceptions to any rule. CUT is an especially interesting case because the other NRMs that experienced serious negative consequences were relatively small and obscure. CUT, by contrast, has even been cited as an example of a successful NRM (e.g., Lewis and Melton 1993).<sup>1</sup> At the time of the prophecy, it had achieved some notoriety. Founded in 1958, it was a well-established and rather large group, with approximately fifteen to twenty thousand members worldwide.<sup>2</sup> It had been under the unques-

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<sup>1</sup> CUT is presented as a successful group in Lewis and Melton's book, but the studies reported there occurred before the full impact of the prophetic failure could be gauged, and their validity has been questioned. Critics argue that the researchers contributing to this book were biased toward CUT, systematically ignoring important questions like the group's previous survivalism. The study was limited, as well, to active members of the group and did not include those who had left (Balch and Langdon 1998).

<sup>2</sup> CUT may have reached an all-time high membership of approximately 25,000 in the late 1970s, but no one knows for sure. Like many NRMs, CUT had a long-standing

tioned leadership of Elizabeth Clare Prophet since 1973, and it was prospering: growing in membership, material wealth, and levels of activity. All this began to change significantly with the apocalyptic misadventures of March 15 and 26, 1990.

What went wrong?

We will argue that while the decline of CUT stems from a specific set of circumstances, analysis of its experience raises theoretical insights with clear implications for other cases. In the end, the decline in the fortunes of CUT was precipitated primarily by two closely related, yet distinguishable, failures of leadership: (1) the mismanagement of the failed prophecy itself, and (2) the mismanagement of a larger background process of organizational change, involving the routinization of charisma. Each failure was bound up with the other. The leadership may well have coped poorly with the failure of prophecy because of a larger leadership problem that was beginning to emerge. Atrophy of leadership in the organization after the failed prophecy in turn magnified the consequences of the prophetic failure. Both management mistakes were aggravated by a set of contingent factors: (1) the social problems posed by the physical isolation of the core members of the group, (2) the relatively sudden end of the Cold War, and (3) the unexpected illness of Elizabeth Clare Prophet. The failure of the CUT prophecy did not need to be so disastrous, but its leaders did not take the measures that we now know are necessary both to survive a failed prophecy and to counteract the other handicaps faced by the group after the disappointment of 1990. After briefly summarizing some pertinent insights from previous research, we will provide an overview CUT and its history, then examine each of the management failures in turn, highlighting the cumulative effect of their interaction.<sup>3</sup>

Our analysis is hampered, we readily admit, by uncertainty on some points, because the information required is simply not available. But this situation is the norm, regrettably, in the study of failed prophecies. Researchers are almost always compelled to work with retrospective accounts of the events in question acquired somewhat sporadically

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practice of inflating the numbers to enhance its public profile. The figures given in this study reflect media reports from the 1970s to the 1990s, as well as estimates from CUT members and defectors, including several long-term members of the staff of the organization.

<sup>3</sup> A further, related explication of the factors that affect the ability of groups to survive the failure of prophecy may be found in Chapter 4 of this volume. Our primary concern here is the crucial role played by the leadership. In other contexts other processes are more consequential (see, e.g., Dein and Dawson 2008).

from interested parties. Retrospective accounts of failed prophecies are often at odds with each other, tend to be biased and very difficult to verify in any satisfactory way. Festinger *et al.*'s path-breaking study provides a noteworthy exception, but it suffers from other methodological problems (Van Fossen 1988: 194–96; Stark 1996: 220; Bainbridge 1997: 136–38).

The analysis offered here stems from the integration and extension of insights from our previous work on CUT and other case studies of instances of prophetic disconfirmation, most particularly the book *The Church Universal and Triumphant: Elizabeth Clare Prophet's Apocalyptic Movement* (Whitsel 2003) and the article "When Prophecy Fails and Faith Persists: A Theoretical Overview" (Dawson 1999; cf. Dein and Dawson 2008). This chapter supplements these sources in three ways: (1) new findings drawn from transcripts of past interviews; (2) more recent telephone interviews with ex-members who lived through the failure of this prophecy, and (3) insights provided by a new book by Elizabeth Clare Prophet's daughter, Erin Prophet (2009), who played a prominent role in these events.<sup>4</sup> The analysis provided in this chapter adjusts and extends this discussion with insights from other work on instances of failed prophecy that is more theoretically oriented. Clearly, in the case of CUT, more research is required on many key issues, and in our conclusion we will delineate what needs to be investigated further and why, addressing in the process some of the alternative views raised by other scholars who have some first-hand familiarity with this group.

### *Theorizing the Response to Failed Prophecies*

Building on the work of Joseph Zygmunt (1972), J. Gordon Melton (1985) and others, we propose that religious groups confronted with a failed prophecy can avail themselves of at least three different, though interrelated, adaptation strategies to assure their survival: intensified

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<sup>4</sup> The interviews reported in the present study are published here for the first time and were all conducted by Bradley Whitsel. Eight ex-members who participated in the preparations for the prophecy in Montana and had not previously been interviewed were located. We found that most people were very reluctant to cooperate, wishing to put the incident firmly behind them. Two were interviewed by phone for an hour. Six failed to respond or declined to be interviewed.

*proselytization*, various *rationalizations*, and acts of *reaffirmation*. As the record shows, contrary to Festinger *et als.*' expectation, the first response is rare, but the other two are common. Based on the case study literature, it appears that there are at least four different types of rationalizations employed by groups.

In the first place, the empirical disconfirmation of a prophecy could be discounted by claiming that the predicted changes actually did happen, but on another plane of existence. This *spiritualization* of the failure—as Melton terms it—is perhaps the most frequently used and effective type of rationalization. Second, however, prophetic leaders can also discount the seeming failure of a prophecy by claiming that the call to heed it was only a test of faith for their followers. Third, more negatively, they can blame the failure of a prophecy on human error (e.g., their own and others in calculating of the precise date of the cataclysm). Fourth, they can attribute a failure to the misunderstanding or interference of others (e.g., the media mistook the words of their leader to be a prophecy, when such was never the case). Most groups employ some combination of these rationalizations. But, since it involves claiming that the prophecy actually has been fulfilled in some way, the most effective in deflecting the potential damage of the failure is spiritualization.

As Zygmunt (1970: 934) points out, for example, the Jehovah's Witnesses predicted Christ's second coming in 1878, 1881, 1914, 1918, and 1925—and they did so again in 1975 after Zygmunt's article appeared! Each failure up to 1975 was explained with a spiritualization that marked the partial fulfillment of God's plan: The year 1878 “marked the point at which the ‘nominal Christian Churches were cast off from God's favor.” The year 1881 “marked the time when ‘death became a blessing’” to saints. The year 1914 marked the “End of the ‘Time of the Gentiles [that is, the Christian nations]’” The year 1918 marked the moment “Christ ‘entered the temple for the purpose of judgment.’” The year 1925 marked the establishment of a “New Nation” with Christ as its head.

Following the prophetic disappointment of 1975, the Jehovah's Witnesses switched to a rationalization of blaming others and more or less denying that the prophecy had ever been part of the official teachings of the church (see Singelenberg 1989: 34; Penton 1985: 103–08). It is unclear why the rationalization pattern changed, but it is noteworthy that by 1975 the organization had successfully made the transition through the routinization of charisma. Each of the early prophecies was closely associated with the charismatic authority of either Charles Russell, the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, or his equally prominent, though



less charismatic successor, Joseph Rutherford. By 1975, the Jehovah's Witnesses was a thoroughly bureaucratized organization, led by persons whose authority was derived from their positions in the Watchtower Society. The leaders no longer controlled the sect through what Max Weber called "pure charisma." This gave them and the Watchtower organization the stability, strength and flexibility to separate the sect from the discrediting fallout of the prophetic disappointment by rather inconsistently denying that the prophecy had ever really been made and blaming the membership for its failure. In these more secure circumstances, the Jehovah's Witnesses were able to purge the sect of any leaders tainted by the prophecy, as well as many of the better-educated elements of the rank and file who might question how the crisis was handled.

Matthew Schmalz thinks this strategy "essentially saved the organization from collapse." He states that the response seemed "primarily directed toward reestablishing group cohesion through revision, denial, and purge" (1994: 304; cf. Penton 1985: 99–126). In other words, the Jehovah's Witnesses reverted rather quickly, and in this instance rather harshly, to the third adaptation strategy, *reaffirmation*—the term Melton uses to refer to the common tendency for groups to respond to a failure by turning inward and working to increase social solidarity through special educational activities, celebrations and rituals. A prime illustration is provided by the day-long "teach-in" held by the Lubavitch at their Brooklyn headquarters following the surprising death of their messianic leader (Shaffir 1995: 128, Dein and Dawson 2008). Given the example of the Jehovah's Witnesses, perhaps systematic purges of the membership should be added to the list of reaffirming actions.

The role of each of the three "adaptation strategies" has been illustrated with examples drawn from various groups, ranging from the Seekers through to the Jehovah's Witnesses and Lubavitch Jews, to various Japanese, UFO, and New Age religious groups (cf., Dawson 1999, Stone 2000). The relative success of any of these strategies, which normally are used in tandem, depends on certain "influencing conditions." Using the existing case studies as resources, six such conditions can be specified: the level of in-group social support, decisive leadership, the scope and sophistication of the group's ideology, the vagueness of the prophecy, the presence of ritual framing, as well as various as yet unexplored organizational factors. In general it may be said that the greater the level of in-group social support, the more decisive the leadership, the greater the scope and sophistication of the ideology, the vaguer the prophecy, and the

more ritualistic the treatment of the moment of failure, the more likely it is that a group will survive the disconfirmation of an apocalyptic prediction.<sup>5</sup>

Modifying Festinger *et als'* theory, we agree with Melton that the evidence indicates that rationalization, not increased proselytizing, is the *sine qua non* of surviving a failed prophecy. It, not proselytizing, is the universal response of these groups. How the rationalization is instituted, however, appears to be crucial. From the existing case studies it would appear that *spiritualization* is the most effective type of rationalization. For it to work, however, several of the influencing conditions must be in place: most consequentially, in-group social support, decisive leadership, and access to a fairly sophisticated group ideology. More specifically, barring other complications, *it seems that the survival of any group depends on leaders who act decisively to formulate a rationalization that spiritualizes the failure, in line with important elements of the existing ideology, and then delivers the rationalization swiftly, confidently and fully to the membership.*

All of these elements are important. Some groups have offered rationalizations, but failed to communicate them adequately to a dispersed or dispersing membership. This mistake can be costly, as indicated by the difficulties experienced by such groups as Ichigen no Miya, the Baha'is Under the Provision of the Covenant, and the Mission de l'Esprit Saint (Taaaki 1979, Balch *et al.* 1983, Palmer and Finn 1992). Without a plausible rationalization that is shared by almost all the followers, adequate in-group social support will not materialize. As Festinger *et als'* original theory stressed, it is the "in-group social support" that plays the most telling role in determining whether a group will successfully navigate the stormy seas of failed prophecy.<sup>6</sup> The successful implementation of the

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<sup>5</sup> None of this is surprising, once it is spelled out. But with the partial exception of Zygmunt (1972), no one had previously sought to summarize and relate systematically the different factors isolated in studies. In the introduction to his anthology of many of the best case studies, Stone (2000) provides a similar, though more discursive overview, corroborating key findings. The final "influencing condition," the organization of the group, has yet to be systematically examined.

<sup>6</sup> See the fifth of the five conditions Festinger *et al.* (1956: 4) stipulated for their theory of cognitive dissonance to hold: "The individual must have social support. It is unlikely that one isolated believer could withstand the kind of disconfirming evidence we have specified. If, however, the believer is a member of a group of convinced persons who can support one another, we would expect the belief to be maintained and the believers to attempt to proselytize or to persuade nonmembers that the belief is correct." (cf. Dawson 1999: 71).

rationalization, which is a management task, is the prerequisite condition for surviving, because it provides the necessary ideological framework for the mobilization of in-group social support. It is the social support that most assures that a group will remain intact in the wake of the failure.<sup>7</sup>

Proselytizing and purges both are forms of reaffirming activity that may or may not be present in any particular situation depending on certain features of the group and its circumstances. Examining the case literature, it seems likely that intensified proselytizing becomes an important aspect of the adaptive process in small groups, like the Seekers whom Feslinger *et al.* studied, because there are insufficient members to provide the necessary level of in-group social support. In larger organizations such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, and eventually the Baha'is Under the Provision of the Covenant (Balch *et al.* 1997), this reaffirming measure is simply not required. In fact, doubting or marginal members can be purged to create a more reliable cadre of members with which to supply in-group social support.

Equipped with these insights, how might we now interpret what happened in the case of CUT?

### *The Church Universal and Triumphant*

CUT's theological template was largely inherited from the metaphysical roots of two historic alternative religious traditions, New Thought and Theosophy. Mark L. Prophet (1918–1973), an Army Air Corps veteran from Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, fashioned the precursor to the CUT belief system from his own involvement with splinter groups descending from this esoteric spiritual lineage. In particular, the I AM Religious Activity, founded by Guy Ballard (1878–1939) in the early 1930s provided Prophet with his philosophical worldview. CUT's immediate predecessor, The Summit Lighthouse, was initiated by Prophet in Washington, DC in 1958. A direct off-shoot of I AM spirituality, Prophet's group

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<sup>7</sup> The whole process is dialectical, as Stone observes (2000: 17): "[T]he social and cultural [ideological] responses to prophetic failure work in tandem in virtually all successful cases of dissonance reduction.... [T]he spiritualization of a 'failed' prophecy does not take hold or work until there are the necessary social supports upon which disappointed and discouraged members can lean. In the same way, social support, while crucial, is not sufficient to assuage disappointment unless the failed prophecy, in turn, can be reinterpreted within the context of the group's overall system of beliefs. The process appears to build upon itself."

retained its major tenets. These included acknowledgment of the existence of a "Great White Brotherhood" of cosmic beings called "Ascended Masters" whose task was to guide the spiritual evolution of the universe, as well as adherence to a range of other esoteric concepts involving communication with these deities, reincarnation and a belief that an individualized God-Presence resided in every person. Likewise, Prophet's fledgling movement emulated the high level of patriotic fervor born of Guy Ballard's conception of a "cosmic destiny for America." The Ascended Masters had appointed America as the place where a new civilization would appear to serve as the model for the human race.

In 1963, Mark Prophet married Elizabeth Clare (Wulf) Ytreberg, a twenty-one-year-old student attending Boston University and a devotee of esoteric thought. During the next several years, and perhaps as a result of the union between the two energetic religious seekers, The Summit Lighthouse experienced small but steady growth. In 1966, Mark and Elizabeth Clare Prophet made a decision to relocate The Summit Lighthouse to Colorado Springs, a move signifying an important step in the development of the group's worldview. Distrustful of the nation's power elite and believing that Communist interests were working to subvert the country, the Prophets sought to protect their populist NRM from the encroachment of corrupt and threatening outsiders. While in Colorado Springs, The Summit Lighthouse took on a communal form, moving into an old mansion with a small tract of property. Mark Prophet's efforts at publishing the organization's literature and selling mail-order lessons for new initiates helped to bolster the group's membership. By 1970, The Summit Lighthouse had about 1,000 members, many of whom regularly made the trek across the United States to join the committed adherents in Colorado Springs for conferences and special services.

In 1973 Mark Prophet died of a sudden stroke, and The Summit Lighthouse experienced its first major crisis. Elizabeth, who by this time had served for a decade as the group's unofficial co-leader, assumed its stewardship as sole "Messenger of the Ascended Masters" and instituted a set of policies that altered both the structure and philosophy of the organization. In terms of structural change, she adopted the name "Church Universal and Triumphant" and established a number of teaching centers in American cities to attract new members. The philosophical shifts that ensued centered on a renewed emphasis on surviving an expected earthly calamity, a theme introduced by Mark shortly after the move to Colorado Springs. Increasingly, Elizabeth (hereafter Prophet) stressed to

the membership the need to be prepared for a number of catastrophic scenarios, including natural disasters and the possibility of a war with the Soviet Union.

CUT stayed in Colorado Springs until 1976 when Prophet relocated the organizational headquarters to southern California. By this period, CUT had increased its membership to perhaps as many as 25,000 people, though precise figures do not exist. This burgeoning membership provided the organization with the financial resources to purchase a \$5.6 million estate near Malibu. CUT's most devoted core following of about 700 adherents resided at this 218-acre site. Referred to as "Camelot," the expansive property served as the administrative center for CUT, as well as the communal and quasi-monastic home of those with the strongest membership commitments.

While in Malibu, CUT became the focus of negative public attention. Spurred on by the reports of some CUT defectors, local media drew attention to the group's apocalyptic beliefs and separatist tendencies. Tensions between CUT and outsiders were further aggravated by the fallout from the 1978 mass suicide of the Peoples Temple. Journalistic investigations frequently concentrated on the group's unusual blend of Ascended Master teaching and hawkish anticommunism. They discovered that some CUT members, while still in Colorado Springs, had begun to amass a stockpile of firearms for their protection if the government collapsed after a nuclear war or a natural disaster.

During its ten years in California, CUT's beliefs became increasingly apocalyptic. Foreseeing the arrival of future disasters—including world economic collapse, the breakdown of civil order, and the continued likelihood of nuclear conflict—Prophet told her following to sever ties with the outside world and begin work on building a separate civilization of the Elect. As early as 1981, CUT began to acquire land in the Paradise Valley area of southwestern Montana. This is was to be their safe refuge from impending catastrophe and intrusions from the rest of society. By 1986, when the Camelot estate was sold, CUT owned more than 24,000 acres in Paradise Valley, including the 12,000 acre Royal Teton Ranch, and the group's exodus from California was complete.

Prophet described the group's new settlement in Montana as a "New Jerusalem," but soon perceptions of disaster began to mark CUT's outlook once again. From fall 1986 until spring 1990, Prophet's following at the ranch became fixated on visions of a future apocalypse. On Thanksgiving 1986, Prophet made an important address to CUT's ranch community, the substance of which was conveyed to members worldwide

through the group's literature. In the address, Prophet (speaking for the Ascended Master Saint Germain), told her listeners to focus their energies on surviving a Soviet nuclear strike. From this point onward, CUT's membership in Montana mobilized for the disaster and shortly thereafter began constructing emergency underground shelters both on the Royal Teton Ranch and at the group's nearby Glastonbury colony, a site reserved for the homes of several hundred more CUT adherents.

Some communal shelters were also built in nearby towns where CUT members and their families resided. Long-time member Merci Grace Hammon, a one-time youth leader in CUT who severed her ties with the organization in 2005, related her recollections about this time in the group's history. Although only a young child when the survivalist program began, Hammon recalled moving with her family from the hamlet of Pray, Montana to Livingston so that they would have access to a large shelter located near the town's railway yard. Looking back, she remembered descending into the structure and playing with the gold coins her parents had purchased to provide some measure of security in the economically disrupted post-nuclear war world.<sup>8</sup>

As the millennial agitation grew within the core CUT group in Montana, some three to four thousand additional members made their way to the Paradise Valley region to survive the prophesied missile strike. Interviews with CUT members who participated in the organization's 1986–1990 period of apocalyptic excitement clearly reveal the extent to which the core following in Montana adhered to the prophetic warning. One interviewee, a long-time CUT member, indicated that "Saint Germain's warning made everyone feel as though a nuclear war was certain."<sup>9</sup> Another CUT member, who followed the group from Malibu to Montana, reflected: "Like everyone else, I took the preparations seriously and accepted the possible outcome."<sup>10</sup> Well before the church's members reported to the shelters, tensions mounted as the media were alerted to both the frantic survivalist exercises of CUT and Prophet's prediction of a nuclear confrontation (Harris 1990: 17).

Prophet's Thanksgiving warning did not definitively establish a time for the surprise attack. But Erin Prophet, Elizabeth's daughter, maintains that her mother was "convinced" that a Soviet missile strike would take

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<sup>8</sup> Interviewed 16 August 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Interviewed 1 July 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Interviewed 3 July 1994.

place. She asserts, rather, that her mother never relinquished the belief that the shelters would be needed (Prophet 2009: 259). Her mother, however, never pointed to a single day when this would occur. Her mother was “too smart,” Erin indicated, to make a firm prediction about the date because it might start an all-out panic within CUT. She observed, though, that her mother pointed to specific and well-defined calendrical “danger periods” in mid-March 1990 and that those in the inner leadership circle knew that CUT’s leader expected the attack. March 15 represented the zenith point for worldly disaster due to the unusually heavy “karmic increase” her mother perceived on that day (Whitsel 2003: 108). Many CUT members in the worldwide movement were not aware of the March 15 date and did not construct shelters. Those in Montana, however, felt it was necessary. While “there was a range of belief” about a forthcoming disaster, she observes, on the whole the level of conviction was strong. According to her, preparations were taken seriously by the core Montana membership because these members felt the need to preserve civilization in the wake of the anticipated nuclear war.<sup>11</sup> Our research suggests that Prophet’s actions and statements leading up to the spring mobilization more or less constituted a prediction, as reflected in the mounting desperation and sense of urgency in the community. By the time work was nearing completion on the main \$3 million underground shelter (March 1990), it was an established fact for the membership in Montana that the late evening of March 15 was the time for the nuclear war.

In her book, Erin Prophet provides a more graphic description of the enormous scope, intensive nature, and cost of the preparations undertaken.<sup>12</sup> From the fall of 1989 to the spring of 1990 was a time of mounting anxiety, frustration and exhaustion. In the midst of this, her mother was hospitalized to deal with the increasingly frequent and debilitating onset of epileptic seizures, preventing her from providing, even once she returned to the ranch, the mystical visions that the community normally used to guide its activities. At the height of pressures over the failure to meet construction targets for the communal shelters on the ranch, it was Erin, as a “seer” in training, who provided the March 15 date, ostensibly to allow more time for the completion of the shelters. She admits she cannot explain, in any rational sense, why she chose this date. Erin asserts that few people knew of her role, and knowledge of the

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<sup>11</sup> Interviewed 30 May 2005.

<sup>12</sup> She estimated the total cost at a staggering \$20 million (Prophet 2009: 238).

prediction was kept to the inner circle, but rumors soon began to circulate among the staff and other members (2009: 175–78). Elizabeth Clare Prophet formally announced the new date to her staff just days before the move into the shelters (2009: 222). Long before then, though, peoples' imaginations had begun to get the better of them, with people "talking about the fulfillment of Edgar Cayce's prophecies, pole shifts, the axis righting itself, seasons disappearing, and Atlantis rising" (2009: 180).

### *The CUT Failure of 1990: Diagnosis and Consequences*

There is inevitably some ambiguity about the severity of the consequences of the failure of the CUT prophecy of 15 March 1990. This ambiguity is characteristic of most instances of failed prophecy, since even groups that have clearly been damaged typically survive the actual failure in some limited sense. Obversely, the Seekers, the group Festinger *et al.* studied, which supposedly set the paradigm for later cases, did not really escape the consequences of their failed prophecies. When Festinger and his colleagues completed their research the group still persisted, but many of its continuing members were the covert researchers who had been masquerading as loyal members for some time (Van Fossen 1988: 194–96; Stark 1996: 220; Bainbridge 1997: 136–38). It was after they departed that the group soon disbanded, and Mrs. Keech moved away. Eventually she started another group with a different focus. Thus it is difficult to say from case to case whether a group has actually failed or survived. What are the relevant criteria?

CUT persists to this day as a sizeable organization. But the church experienced a series of dramatic setbacks, involving significant declines in its membership and material resources, a worsening of its relations with the larger society, and changes to the basic identity of the group and its leadership. These negative developments all followed the failure of 1990. At points in previous accounts, a more generous interpretation was given to these changes (Whitsel 2003). This interpretation, however, was specifically in relation to limited evidence of how the group managed to weather the immediate non-event. With further reflection and more information, it now seems that CUT counts more as a failure to negotiate the consequences of a failed prophecy than as a success. Mere survival in a radically reduced and altered form is not sufficient to add CUT to the list of groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, who have overcome the



failure of prophecy. The Witnesses were able to recoup the losses after the disappointment of 1975 in a few years, and they suffered few long-term consequences. The survival of CUT, however, is now open to question, and the history of the group clearly reveals that the failed prophecy of 1990 marked a pronounced turning point in its development.

To bring greater order to the data and to avoid simply reiterating the narrative of events, we will assess the fate of CUT in terms of our new understanding of how groups survive the failure of prophecy, paying special attention to evidence of how the crisis was seemingly mismanaged by the leadership. There are two aspects or phases of this failure to consider: first, the mismanagement of the immediate legitimacy crisis surrounding the failure of the actual prophecy; second, the larger and ongoing crisis of legitimacy, partially brought to light by this failure, that is related to the routinization of charisma and organizational transformation in CUT. These crises are tightly intertwined.

### *The Mismanagement of the Aftermath of Prophetic Failure*

Elizabeth Clare Prophet had done much to lay the groundwork for the apocalyptic prediction of 1990. As early as 1969, both Mark and Elizabeth were warning that the world was entering a "Dark Cycle." They taught that there would be accelerated discord until the year 2002. By the mid-1980s the expectations of a coming cataclysm were running high. The move from their college campus near Malibu to the relative isolation of the Royal Teton Ranch in Montana was part of a broader developmental shift, with CUT becoming an otherworldly sect whose countercultural beliefs and apocalypticism placed it on a society-rejecting trajectory. Conspiracy theories about powerful elites out to destroy the world and a survivalist mentality became more conspicuous aspects of life in CUT, especially for the core membership that settled on or near the ranch. This culture of suspicion set the ideological context in which the construction of the bomb shelters began. By the time of the 1990 crisis a "prophetic milieu" (Wallis 1979: 44–50) was thoroughly established, drawing on a complex matrix of ideas from far-right American ideology, UFO mythology, Theosophical cosmology, and other alternative spiritualist discourses (cf. Prophet 2009: 142–43).

After Prophet's 1986 warning of a near-term Soviet strike, other types of cataclysmic visions involving alien abductions, Edgar Cayce's prophecies and various conspiracy theories spread throughout the CUT membership. From then until the shelters were fully constructed, Erin Prophet

commented, "CUT became a clearing-house for a lot of disaster belief." Her mother, Elizabeth Clare, "may or may not have believed in all of these disaster scenarios," Erin said, but she adhered to her belief in a surprise nuclear attack.<sup>13</sup> Over the next two years Elizabeth Clare would give "updates" to her apocalyptic visions, describing the progress of "the four horsemen of the apocalypse," and the success or failure of the group's ritualistic efforts to slow down or even avert the onset of disaster (2009: 136). But there is some ambiguity in the situation. In the years leading up to the event, Prophet's messages contained both words of hope and despair (2009: 135–37). Sometimes her dictations from the Ascended Masters and other pronouncements stressed the inevitability of war, other times they pointed to the possibility of using spiritual means to prevent it. In Erin Prophet's words (2009: 137):

[My mother] based her prophetic model on Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah, who couched his prophecies in terms of if-then. *If* you don't return to the Lord, *then* you will be invaded. Such prophecies were meant to be proven false. The idea that prophecy could be mitigated or changed based on human action was at the core of her teaching, which was opposed to predestination.... However, there was a contradictory message seeded into her world view: Occasionally karma cannot be turned back and the only solution is to get out of the way, all the while praying for a miracle.

Thus the ideological resources were in place, and the followers were well conditioned to accept a plausible rationalization for the failure of Prophet's prediction. Yet it appears she remained silent, missing her opportunity to defuse the initial wave of disappointment and doubt. Her reasons for this are unclear, but the record of other instances of failed prophecy strongly suggests that *the prompt provision of a rationalization is the first requirement for groups to survive this crisis of legitimacy*.

The information available about what happened, though, is very incomplete, and scholars disagree whether the delay in providing a rationalization was consequential. Here we can compare Whitsel's analysis as an "outsider" with Erin Prophet's more recent "insider" account. On the whole, we think the two perspectives are far more convergent than divergent, especially on the key issue: *was a sufficient rationalization provided soon enough, and disseminated well enough, to curtail the most deleterious effects of the failed prophecy?* In a more general sense the two accounts correspond closely in their descriptions of CUT's gravitation to a more apocalyptic and world-rejecting stance, and the development

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<sup>13</sup> Interview, 30 May 2005.

of a prophetic milieu within the organization. Each points to the progressive creation of a highly-insulated separatist style in the community's relations with others during the period of the "shelter cycle."

Whitsel argues that the first "public" evidence of a concerted effort at rationalizing the failure occurred months after the two shelter vigils. In media interviews, Prophet sought to defend herself, telling people she never firmly predicted a nuclear holocaust. She also sought to minimize the importance of the extensive shelter construction program, saying it was "just an insurance policy." She had recourse, in other words, to the "blaming others" rationalization (and there is some truth to her claims), but Whitsel observed that the heightened degree of fear-driven activity in the previous months undermined Prophet's public efforts at downplaying the incident.

This public effort to deflect criticism and ridicule was too little, too late. The damage had been done. Disillusioned CUT members fled in droves after the nuclear disaster failed to happen. By some accounts, half of the three to four thousand CUT adherents who had come to Montana from 1986 until the time of the emergency call suddenly left the area once expectations for a massive Soviet strike dissipated. These included a sizeable portion of Prophet's ranch staff. Many who left did so confused and angry. Within the group, Whitsel noted, a more careful and elaborate effort was made to provide other kinds of rationalizations. This more private process of damage control had two aspects. First, Prophet cautioned the members that the prediction for disaster remained in effect through the year 2002, and she linked their preparation to warnings issued by the Virgin Mary during various apparitions in the twentieth century, in particular the so-called "third secret" of Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal. Second, she informed her ranch staff audience that its prayers and preparedness during the last year had been the reason for the prevention of nuclear war. Later, other elements were added to the rationalization. Prophet first offered these more elaborate rationalizations in an address given on the Royal Teton Ranch on November 28, 1991, about 19 months after the March failures. Hence Whitsel observed that the private rationalizations were delivered too late as well, and it is unclear how thoroughly these views were disseminated to the wider membership.

How does Erin Prophet's "insider" account augment or change this interpretation of events? In the first place, Erin's eyewitness narrative creates the distinct impression that her mother had more or less lost control of the situation. Rather extraordinarily, at the height of the emergency Prophet seems to have abdicated her primary role as the one

true “messenger” of the Ascended Masters. Prophet relied on Erin to “see” the date for the first retreat to the shelters, and in the aftermath of the failure she pressed Erin once again to come up with more predictions, leading to the second failure on March 26. Commenting on the night of the first failure, Erin maintains (2009: 222): “As the midnight deadline passed, Mother began understandably looking for prophecy updates, but I was feeling alienated enough from her to say, ‘I don’t see anything.’ I left the decree session and returned to my bunk where I mulled over recent events . . . and what we would do in the morning if nothing happened.” As the people streamed out of the shelters in the morning Elizabeth Clare Prophet made no attempt to speak to them, or to lead the followers in some kind of ritual to mark the occasion. People simply returned to their routines, though they left their belongings in the shelters, assuming they would be returning to them soon. At this juncture Erin says, there “was disappointment and relief, but not yet disillusionment” (2009: 224).

On March 15, the *New York Times* ran a front-page story on the CUT retreat underground, and the group was soon deluged with requests from other news organizations.<sup>14</sup> Their spokesperson, Murray Steinman “soft-pedaled” the significance of March 15 date and “insisted that it had only been a drill.” This, of course, is the first statement of what would become part of the official rationalization. Erin stresses, however, that people on the ranch soon “began demanding answers from Mother,” which led to the second prediction that war would break out by noon of March 26 (2009: 225–27). Her comments imply that it would be an error to assume that the participants in the first failure simply accepted the rationalization used to appease and divert the media. In fact at this time, Erin stresses, the inner circle of the leadership took the provocative step of more actively engaging in rituals designed to call down judgment on the United States, to help bring on the war. This startling information was unknown until Erin published her book in 2009.

In the aftermath of the second failure, Erin makes no comment on whether her mother did anything to reassure her followers, so presumably nothing happened. Her comments are limited to the impact of the two failures on the members of her own family. In this regard she says, “It was the beginning for all of us of our journey out of the church,” and adds: “[g]oing through this symbolic death had made us less fearful and shifted our priorities away from a future golden age and toward a fuller

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<sup>14</sup> Erin Prophet’s book provides the incorrect publication date of March 14, 1990.

experience of our lives in the present” (2009: 232–33). The first mention of some kind of formal rationalization of the events is an interview her mother did with Ted Koppel of the ABC News show *Nightline* on May 17, 1990. In the interview, Elizabeth strove, as in later interviews, to refocus attention on the non-apocalyptic teachings of the church, while continuing to deny that she had ever predicted nuclear war on a specific date. Rather, she insisted, “there were ‘peak dates’ when war could happen any time during the next twelve years” (2009: 234–35).<sup>15</sup>

At this point in her book, Erin turns to the explanations of sociologists who have studied other instances of failed prophecy to make sense of things. The introduction of this material may have either enriched and sharpened the account she provides or distorted it. With this in mind, she explains (2009: 238–39):

After the March 26 drill, Mother offered no explanation, and simply gave the order to set up the altar in the Court again. On April 8, her birthday, she took a dictation from El Morya that spiritualized the event, a strategy that has often been effective for disappointed apocalyptic groups. She offered encouragement for those who were feeling depressed at having packed their things only to unpack them, and said that the drills were a spiritual test designed to show us “How nothing in the world is of any consequences and how unencumbered you are without being surrounded by so many possessions.” Seizing on this explanation, the audience applauded. As if to preempt the question of whether our work and haste had been for nothing, Morya said, “Your very preparedness itself has forestalled certain events.”

Perhaps, in the absence of such insider information, Whitsel’s outsider account omits a key point. Is it not evidence that Prophet did provide an adequate rationalization, even if it is not what we would call a true “spiritualization” of the events? Certainly it means that some sort of rationalization was provided earlier than Whitsel was aware at the time of his 2003 publication, but we do not know who was present on April 8 or whether the message was conveyed to others in the church. There is a certain tone of skepticism in Erin’s narration of these and other related developments, but it is difficult to discern whether this reflects accurately her own doubts at the time (let alone those of others) or if it is more characteristic of her current view. Her statement also indicates, however, that the group on the ranch had been left to figure things out for themselves for eight days—which is a long period of time under these

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<sup>15</sup> The 12-year period of retribution was another aspect of the same vision of Erin Prophet from which the March 15 date was derived. A 12-year period of troubles was to begin on April 23, 1990 (Prophet 2009: 176).

stressful circumstances. (Those off the ranch did not participate in the second “drill” because they were not informed about it by the leadership, and it is unclear how much exposure they had to which rationalizations and when.)

This discussion raises an important interpretive question: What constitutes taking too long to offer a rationalization, or when can we say conversely that a response was prompt enough? There is no standard to which we can turn, but in similar instances the rationalizations that proved successful were offered in the first flush of disappointment, as people were just beginning to cope with what did not happen and the sacrifices they made to try to make it happen (e.g., Hardyck and Braden 1962, Palmer and Finn 1999, Shaffir 1995). Certainly there is strong reason to suspect, given Erin’s further comments (2009: 240), that the eight-day delay was less than optimal:

Those at the epicenter of our shelter project would not have an easy time spiritualizing the experience. One could sense it in the cafeteria—those who had previously gathered in talkative groups now sat in ones and twos. The newly married couples would scoop up food in containers and decamp to their rooms to reheat it over hotplates, many of them planning their exits. Those who decided to leave would write resignation letters to Mother, professing that they still believed in the masters and the messenger, but they needed to pay off their debts or finish their educations. They would say goodbye to us in the cafeteria, hugging their closest friends. We did not ask why they were leaving or try to convince them to stay.

By the time the limited and diverse rationalizations began to make their way through the organization there is reason to believe that the in-group social support and solidarity of the core members of CUT had been broken.

Returning to the issue of leadership, Erin’s account provides much other evidence of a general paralysis, especially on her mother’s part. She notes that her mother failed to bring the shelter project to an official end. There was “no finale or celebration” (2009: 240); things just tapered off. Likewise, she never “compassionately address[ed] the economic upheaval experienced by her followers” (2009: 241). No definite plan for or vision of the future was announced, beyond vague pronouncements that a threat still loomed. Things just drifted back to a nominally normal pre-crisis state of affairs. But for the staff at the ranch “the way it used to be” did not really exist anymore, and soon they were beset with many additional problems, all aggravated by the extraordinary personal and collective costs of what came to be known as the “shelter cycle.” In all of

this, Erin (2009: 238) comments, it was if her mother had “developed real or imagined short-term memory loss about her role.... She was unable to admit that our altar work had damaged the lives of thousands of people.”

In the end, then, we think *the weight of evidence suggests that CUT was severely damaged by its failed prophecies and was damaged more than needed to be the case*. Much of the responsibility for this damage lies with Elizabeth Clare Prophet: She took too long to develop a set of rationalizations. The rationalizations were insufficiently consistent and convincing. Insufficient care was taken to communicate the rationalizations effectively to all the members of CUT, on and off the ranch.

At points the analysis in *The Church Universal and Triumphant* can seem inconsistent on this count. At one point it states, “the church’s rationalizations about the failed prediction were sufficient to counteract a sudden and dramatic loss of faith for most group members” (p. 122). This claim is made, however, in the context of an attempt to explain why, contrary to Festinger *et al.*, CUT did not engage in intensified proselytization right after the failure. As such, it reflects the ways in which the study of failed prophecies has been skewed by a preoccupation with confirming or refuting the ideas of Festinger *et al.* In line with the analysis provided above, the interpretation at this point in the book is stressing the sufficiency of rationalizations in dealing with the fallout of a prophetic disconfirmation. The ambiguity of the situation, however, points to the interpretive challenges faced by researchers seeking to unravel the tangled consequences of failed prophecies in the fairly volatile context of most NRMs. The private rationalizations were enough, for a time, to keep even more people from leaving, but soon other related setbacks undermined their efficacy. There are several reasons why CUT did not engage in proselytizing in the wake of the prophetic disappointment, and each helps to explain the unique fate of this group, while also illustrating a broader principle of our theory of how groups survive prophetic failures.

*In-group social support* seems to be one of the true constants of groups that successfully weather a prophetic failure. There will be no need to proselytize after the failure if the group is of sufficient size, its members live in relatively close proximity, and the group is free of serious factional conflicts. This was certainly true of CUT. Like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, CUT could afford to lose some of its members because it was large enough to retain a core membership of sufficient size to provide the requisite sense of solidarity in the face of adversity. They could do this for a time at least because the core membership was so concentrated

and physically isolated on and around the ranch, and the group was relatively free at this point of any festering divisions. That may be why Prophet's rationalizations first appeared to work to some degree. It may also explain why the leadership delayed so long in providing any sort of rationalization, but the concentration and isolation of the membership of CUT cuts both ways.<sup>16</sup>

It was materially, socially and psychologically expensive for the 3,000–4,000 most devoted members of CUT to heed the call of their leader and settle on and nearby the ranch. They had to burn many bridges, leaving jobs, homes, family and friends, while investing large sums of money and time in the construction of bomb shelters. The disappointment felt by the members of CUT must have been proportionately greater than in some other groups, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, precisely because they sacrificed more to participate in the event in the first place. In the long run, elaborate preparatory actions may either exhaust the capacity of individuals and groups to preserve or at least lead them to fail to act on future prophecies.

The isolation of the CUT ranch had a beneficial initial effect, working to galvanize the support and social solidarity of the devotees that came. It buffered them from the ridicule and interference of other people, in terms of the rest of society, the local community and their own previous social networks. It worked to render them much more homogeneous and heightened their resolve to bear the burden of their elect status. But once the bubble of anticipation burst, most of the members were left in dire straits and many had little choice but to leave quickly. This rapid departure of such a large number of people must have amplified the shock of disappointment felt by the remnant that choose to stay or had no choice but to stay on the ranch.

In many cases, those who had migrated to the area to be near the shelters had invested thousands or even tens of thousands of dollars in

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<sup>16</sup> Of the more than twenty thousand members of CUT in the 1980s, about one thousand core members resided on or in the vicinity of the ranch in Montana. After 1986 they were joined, in a progressively more rapid way, by around three to four thousand members responding to the call to come to the ranch to avoid the nuclear holocaust predicted by Prophet. Our argument applies to the newly expanded membership, who were living in close proximity to the leadership of CUT and involved in the daily operation of the religious organization and preparations for surviving the nuclear attack.



their construction. The money for reserved spots in the cluster of shelters on CUT's subdivision property was required in advance to finance the assembly of the underground structures and, thus, was often a financial burden. When the Soviet missile strike did not occur, CUT members who had come to the region preceding the envisaged cataclysm found it necessary to locate employment to support them and, in some cases, to pay off debts they had incurred to go to Montana. Problems emerged for CUT newcomers, though, when they tried to find jobs. Rural Park County offered few work opportunities for the late-arriving members and their dependents who had made the trek to Paradise Valley from a number of distant states and several foreign countries.

Due consideration must be given as well to the physical, social and psychological costs incurred by weeks of exhaustive work undertaken by virtually the whole population of the ranch to prepare for the imminent cataclysm. Erin emphasizes the elaborate, expensive, desperate, and ultimately wasteful nature of these preparations in her account (Prophet 2009: 219–20), and several testimonials are provided in Whitsel's book. The following passage provides a glimpse into some of the mundane yet significant costs:

Staff member Brenda Wilson recalled that the ranch community was in "a high stress mode" by the time the date for disaster approached. Wilson said staff worked in teams to prepare the Mol Herron shelter and its inhabitants for the nuclear war. One of these tasks involved transporting and processing the many tons of food needed to keep the ranch residents alive after the destruction of world society. Remembering her own role in this operation, she described taking inventory of canned food-stuffs in stacks over twenty feet high that, along with hundreds of tons of wheat, were stocked in the shelter. Wilson said that CUT staff had to acquire their own supply of clothing and personal items to last for a period of up to seven years.... Since space in the shelter was limited, as were the bank accounts of staff members, the ranch residents were forced to make hard decisions about what personal supplies they could take with them when they descended.

Years later, people readily recalled in interviews the strain of working around the clock, in the cold, under the glare of spotlights, and eventually with the protection of armed guards dressed in radiation suits.

The stress of preparing for the end of the world as we know it was compounded by the stress of dealing with the personal consequences. The loss of their investment, both material and emotional, over the course of one anxious night must have been devastating to the morale of the community, especially when the leadership of CUT did so little to off-

set the costs people had incurred or to forestall their departure.<sup>17</sup> Erin Prophet observed that while there was a range of responses on the part of group members, many felt that they had been “strung along and scared to death and at this point they simply had enough.”<sup>18</sup>

In the immediate aftermath, no rationalization was forthcoming, let alone acts of reaffirmation (ritualistic or otherwise), undermining the opportunity for real in-group social support from the beginning. This consequence was masked for a time by the continued need of many members to cling to their roles in the organization for lack of other practical and meaningful options. Thus while the relative isolation of the core membership may have proved somewhat beneficial in the short term, it was ultimately a liability that the leadership needed to take into account after the prophetic failure. Their failure to take the actions required to sustain as many people as possible on the ranch, by at least temporarily supplying them with the ideological justification and material means for doing so, proved disastrous in the long run.<sup>19</sup>

Ironically, if CUT had stayed in California, the issue of physical and social isolation would not have been a significant factor. Of course, the survivalist scenario may never have been developed on such a grand scale either, because of the close proximity of other people. But if the group still had moved in this direction, other things being equal, both the initial loss of members and the eventual loss of in-group social support may well have been less severe, since the physical isolation of the membership would not have aggravated the problems posed by the

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<sup>17</sup> As this discussion reveals, the list of six “influencing conditions” affecting the fate of groups experiencing a failure of prophecy can be extended to include many other conditions, such as the relative physical and social isolation of the group, and the extent and nature of the preparations undertaken in anticipation of the prophecy. But, as indicated, both conditions may work either to increase or decrease the likelihood of a group surviving the failure, depending on the adaptive actions of the leadership.

<sup>18</sup> Interview, 30 May 2005.

<sup>19</sup> In his visit to the CUT ranch in the summer of 1993, sociologist of religion Gary Sheperd gained the impression that the group had weathered the failure of the 1990 prophecy fairly well. Members assured him that the shelter incident was serious, but only part of series of preparatory drills for the real cataclysm yet to come (personal communication, 4 November 2005). But visiting the ranch a year later, in the summer of 1994, Whitsel gained a quite different impression. He believes it is likely that the explanations that Sheperd heard were in fact later rationalizations, often promulgated by members who stayed invested in the group or were even new to the staff, as contrasted to those who took the March 15 prophecy to heart and soon left the group in disappointment. Much depends on who is interviewed and how.

failure of the prophecy. But no matter where the group was located, the effective communication of an immediate rationalization, in conjunction with some acts of reaffirmation, would have produced a preferable result.

*The Mismanagement of the Routinization of Charisma*

It is difficult to explain the paralysis that seemed to seize the leadership of CUT in the wake of the failed prophecy.<sup>20</sup> But the series of smaller crises that later befell the organization as it struggled to adapt to its post-failure fate suggest that the mismanagement of the prophetic debacle was itself in many ways a symptom of underlying organizational deficiencies that were eventually to become quite apparent, in part because the leadership was unable to deal with the fallout of the failure. It appears that the membership had begun to decline even before the non-event of 1990. In fact the preoccupation with the survivalist agenda seems to have alienated part of the group's traditional base. If the leadership had handled the failure more adroitly, the other problems may have been either averted or managed better, because at the very least the resources would have been in place to do so. But CUT had been under the charismatic control of Prophet for almost twenty years, and the dismal response to the prophetic failure is indicative of the difficulties CUT was experiencing in making the transition to a postcharismatic stage of development.

It is important to remember that the move to Montana was part of a broader shift in the identity of CUT as it was becoming more of a world-rejecting apocalyptic cult. The relocation was prompted by the ideological milieu that gave rise to the prophecy, and the specific prophecy justified the change in location. Moving the headquarters of CUT and promulgating an apocalyptic prophecy are acts that Roy Wallis (1982) and Dawson (1998, 2002) have previously identified with attempts to counter certain crises of legitimacy typical of charismatic modes of authority. For reasons too complex to review here, groups under the sway of strong charismatic leaders, like most NRMs, tend to be inherently unstable. Success simply poses problems for such groups. Charismatic authority depends on leaders' abilities to achieve a fine balance of rapport and detachment with their followers. Within the restrictive framework of an authoritarian and hierarchical organizational structure, the charismatic

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<sup>20</sup> It is tempting, as some have proposed, to attribute the delays to the early onset of Prophet's Alzheimer's disease. But the events in question happened ten years before Prophet's illness was announced, and there is no evidence to support invoking the disease as a significant factor, at least in the early 1990s.

leader must make each member feel that he or she has a stake in the destiny of the group. Success, involving growth in membership, material assets and responsibilities, usually places a severe strain on the leader's capacity to maintain the networks of personal contacts and investments of time required to sustain the intensely personal charismatic bonds that legitimate the leader's power. The charismatic leaders of successful NRMs, such as CUT, can no longer directly manage the affairs of their groups. As authority must be delegated to others, the organization is rationalized and democratized in ways that curtail the power of the leader. This routinization of charisma, as Weber (1964) called it, is the natural fate of most groups founded by charismatic leaders. Some charismatic leaders, however, are disinclined to accept this fate, and they may introduce strategies to resist the routinization. Wallis and Dawson have each identified dramatic shifts in the location of NRMs and the promulgation of prophecies of impending doom as two of the more conspicuous strategies used by cult leaders to prolong their authority in the midst of organizational pressures to reduce it.

The mobilization of the people and resources required by a major move or to prepare for the apocalypse keeps the attention of members focused squarely on the leader. It also highlights the traditional basis of the leader's authority, especially when the justification for these dramatic developments is found in the mystical inspirations and revelations of the leaders. Those who institute these kinds of changes, and it is common for these two things to happen together, are engaging in a form of "crisis mongering," done with an eye toward keeping life in the new religion exciting and more dependent than otherwise on the continued pronouncements of the leader. The leaders, however, rarely seem to give due consideration to the long-term risks of these strategies, in part because their actions are impulsive and intuitive. They either truly believe that supernatural forces will intervene on their behalf when needed, or they are so psychologically drained that, subconsciously at least, they are willing to bring their labors to an end, gloriously or otherwise.

Of course we have little or no direct evidence to support this line of reasoning since we lack, in most instances, adequate access to the thoughts of the leaders and their private conversations with trusted lieutenants. But the pattern appears to provide a plausible explanation for the extreme and seemingly irrational actions of such figures as Jim Jones of the Peoples Temple (e.g., Hall 1987, Layton 1998), Joseph DiMambro of the Solar Temple (e.g., Hall and Schuyler 1997, Mayer 1999), and Marshall Applewhite of Heaven's Gate (Balch and Taylor 2002, Lalich

2004). Does it explain what happened to CUT? We cannot say for sure, but the scenario provides a plausible explanation for both the prophetic turn of CUT in the first place and Prophet's delayed response to the failure of the prophecy. Even more, it helps to account for the series of management missteps that afflicted CUT in the years after the failure, which pretty much assured that CUT would never really recover from that failure.

There is much in Erin Prophet's account of events that lends credence to this view and almost nothing to contradict it. She itemizes the many ways in which her mother seemed to be losing her ability to manage affairs, losing touch with the ranch staff, depending ever more fully yet erratically on others for mystical insight, while sequentially upping the ante in terms of ever more radical visions and pronouncements of threatening conspiracies and approaching doom. She notes that all of these trends start in 1986 and coincide with the move from California to Montana (2009: 142), and she draws links with the stress her mother experienced as a result of several legal cases, negative media reports, and ongoing problems with several of her children. She also relates these developments, in ways no one previously has, to evidence of her mother's progressively worsening mental health issues, from 1987 on (e.g., Prophet 2009: 12, 82, 118, 136, 182, 185, 189, 196, 218, 239, 240, 244).

Other serious woes, on which Erin does not comment, perhaps because she was not directly involved with them, began to plague CUT in 1989, while they were still preparing for the nuclear cataclysm. Acting on information from an informant, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) began an investigation of CUT, placing the tax advantages of their religious status in jeopardy. Then the Justice Department launched an investigation based on the both legal and illegal arms purchases made by members of CUT and on concerns about money laundering. After a prolonged, costly, and emotionally draining three-year audit and legal struggle, the IRS revoked CUT's tax exempt status and sought \$2.5 million in back taxes and penalties. The legal maneuvering continued until 1994 when the group's official designation as a religious organization was reinstated, in the shadow of the bad publicity experienced by the government after the Branch Davidian fiasco at Waco, Texas. But the settlement entailed stipulations and financial punishments that hurt the organization, both financially and symbolically. To help reverse its fortunes, in 1993 CUT rather extraordinarily sponsored a team of social scientists to study the group with the intent of counteracting the bad press created by the shelter crisis and the unflattering parallels that the media kept draw-

ing with the Branch Davidian tragedy (Lewis and Melton 1993). Beginning in 1994 CUT also launched a series of international recruitment initiatives in Korea, Russia, and Latin America, designed to offset the membership losses from 1990. They began to refashion themselves as a New Age group, explicitly promoting their message to a broader audience with which they had some affinities (and some stark differences, see Whitsel 2003: 142–45). But despite some success with these recruitment efforts a deeper malaise continued to afflict the core membership, especially at the ranch.

Growing morale problems surfaced at the ranch in 1995 signaled by a “steady flow of resignations from [the] board of directors by high-ranking ministers and other key officeholders.” Prophet’s “rigid management of the organization” was being met with “stiff opposition” and many defections occurred as various apostate groups became more vocal and attracted media attention. In a pamphlet sent to its members, CUT even acknowledged the mounting discontent and admitted that while Prophet continued to enjoy the complete “sponsorship of God” she may have made “human errors of judgment in placing certain church members in management positions” (cf. Whitsel 2003: 142–45).

But the rumors of dissension circulating since the failed prophecy persisted, and soon a complete overhaul of the group’s management was announced. Downplaying the effects of sinking morale and defections, spokesmen attributed the sudden organizational change to Prophet’s desire to concentrate solely on her role as the church’s Messenger and spiritual leader. As part of the restructuring plan, Prophet resigned as president of the church, a post she held since 1973. The position was assumed by Gilbert Cleirbaut, A Belgain-born Canadian management consultant. The organizational change was necessary, according to outside observers, because CUT had been suffering from serious management and financial troubles. Reports suggested that Prophet’s adoption of a rigid, bureaucratic management style on the Royal Teton Ranch had damaged morale, stifled staff efficiency and hindered prospects for church growth. In accordance with the new organizational framework, Cleirbaut was to establish a more democratic structure for CUT operations in which management decisions were not simply generated at the top.

Once again the corrective came too late, and the organization’s financial position worsened as it continued to bleed members. Breaking significant symbolic boundaries, hence threatening the internal integrity of CUT, outsiders were allowed to buy land in the residential community

established near the ranch, and eventually large parcels of the ranch itself were sold to the government and others. Prophet justified these desperate actions with directives from the Ascended Masters, but this probably only served to de-legitimize her authority further and damage the credibility of CUT in general. In 1996 another symbolic blow was struck when Prophet's fourth marriage ended in divorce. The fifteen-year-old marriage, which produced a son late in life, was widely believed to have been arranged by the Ascended Masters. Various other small crises ensued: more cuts were made to the staff, and annual functions such as the summer conferences were moved off the ranch and reduced in size. Then, in January of 1999, Prophet relinquished her remaining duties because it was announced she had Alzheimer's disease. In the summer of the same year, Cleirbaut also unexpectedly resigned, amid ongoing efforts to transform CUT from an other-worldly apocalyptic cult to a purveyor of New Age wisdom and remedies. Cleirbaut had spearheaded this change, but things were not going well. Much of the membership remained steeped in the dualistic, conspiratorial and survivalist ideology of the older group, and they resisted the proposed changes, while the large New Age constituency never really materialized as planned.

Merci Grace Hammon thinks the organization's fate will depend on whether its old theology can be recast into a post-Prophet form. But she is not optimistic. "The historic battle between the forces of light and darkness never went away in the Church," she observes, and the dualistic theology continues to appeal to a large segment of the membership. This is particularly evident, she points out, with two specific camps in CUT: the long-term members who participated in the 1990 shelter cycle, and the children of CUT parents who remained part of the movement's core. Hammon believes that those who took part in the survivalist program and prepared for global catastrophe view themselves as an elite "which demonstrated total commitment to Prophet and her prophecy." This substantial sub-group within CUT wears their involvement in the 1990 mobilization as a badge of honor.

Insofar as CUT's younger membership in Montana is concerned, Hammon maintains that they too are surprisingly faithful to the old belief system. They were socialized by their parents (many of whom served on the ranch staff) to see themselves as the movement's spiritual core, and they are reluctant to distance themselves from this flattering self-perception. The shelter cycle "veterans" and CUT's devoted younger members would like to see a return to the organization's historic orientation as "an elite-led mystery school." They are resistant to the more demo-

cratic structure instituted in the wake of Prophet's infirmity. Given the internal divisions and the recent creation of two new Ascended Master splinter groups by ex-members, she feels that CUT will wane and more of its members will depart.<sup>21</sup>

Certainly CUT did not enter the twenty-first century well. With its Messenger ill, and with no stated plans to recognize another, CUT occupies strange, transitory ground as a new religious movement in the midst of an identity crisis. Of course CUT was also the victim of another significant twist of fate. Like its predecessor in the Depression era, the I AM movement of Guy and Edna Ballard, CUT demonized the USSR as the source of evil in the world, and so the end of the Cold War, shortly after the failed CUT prophecy, left the group rudderless. "The loss of its Soviet enemy quickly deprived the superpatriotic group of its anticommunist ideological foundation, which was the main catalyst for the organization's embrace of survivalism. Left without the opponent with which it conducted spiritual warfare for over three decades, CUT faltered and a period of organizational confusion set in." A resourceful leader may well have capitalized on this unanticipated turn of events to provide a much needed rationalization—a quasi-spiritualization—of the prophetic failure. But this did not happen.

In sum, with the limited information in hand, it seems likely that the failed prophecy of CUT contributed substantially to the failure of CUT as a NRM because Prophet's organization failed to negotiate successfully the routinization of charisma required to succeed while the legitimacy of her charismatic authority was being progressively undermined.

*The Critical Role of Leadership  
in Surviving the Failure of Prophecy*

Many factors contributed to the demise of CUT. We believe, however, that the most important factor was the lack of decisive leadership after the failure of prophecy. This factor was stressed in Dawson's previous analyses of how NRMs survive failed prophecies: Only one of the thirteen groups he examined actually collapsed after the failure of a prophecy. In this case, it was the singular ineptness of the leadership that played the decisive role in the dissolution of the group. Several other groups did

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<sup>21</sup> Interviewed 16 August 2006.



experience serious reversals in their fortunes after a prophetic failure; nevertheless, in the first flush of disconfirmation neither the authority of the leaders, charismatic or otherwise, nor the ideology of the groups was challenged by the membership, even though their individual and collective resources had been depleted. When the leaders of these groups stumbled, however, and failed to provide rationalizations for the disconfirmations sufficiently soon after the experience of disillusionment, a true crisis was precipitated.

Is the CUT case comparable? We believe it is, but we cannot be certain without acquiring a great deal more information (see below), and at this juncture it is wise to acknowledge frankly the interpretive difficulties facing anyone examining this and other instances of failed prophecy. We suggest that the explanation we are advancing has at least four virtues:

First, while CUT's spectacular failure of prophecy was the subject of much media attention and is commonly discussed by scholars of NRMs, the analysis offered in *The Church Universal and Triumphant* remains the definitive academic account of what happened and the consequences of that. The present analysis significantly sharpens the previous account by demonstrating how the data already in hand will support a more complete and systematic explanation, one that moves well beyond the limited purview of cognitive dissonance theory toward a more satisfactory understanding of the complex interplay of social processes that determine how, and how well, groups respond to such crises of legitimation.

Second, most of the literature available on instances of failed prophecy suffers from a too limited timeframe. Studies tend to present snapshots of the response of a single group to a single event. The historical context is usually very limited, and there is insufficient awareness of long-term consequences. Under the influence of cognitive dissonance theory, research has focused on the immediate reaction to prophetic failure. Once the role of more extended social processes is taken into consideration the need for a more longitudinal approach, like that adopted here, comes to the fore. All the same, establishing the exact causal links between the disconfirmation of 1990 and the later troubles of CUT remains problematic. More specific and penetrating empirical research is required and *post hoc* it may be impossible to make anything more than a plausible connection.

Third, there are only a few other studies available of such events that offer some kind of longitudinal perspective, and they are either less elaborate than the approach taken here or they lack a sufficiently systematic theoretical perspective. Robert W. Balch *et al*'s studies (1983,

1997) of the Baha'is Under the Provisions of the Covenant are based on four separate episodes of participant observation over a sixteen-year period. The theory of cognitive dissonance of *When Prophecy Fails*, however, remains the focal point of the analysis, with some attention is given to additional social factors. Diana G. Tumminia's extended ethnographic treatment of the Unarians is by comparison even richer in data, providing a full sense of the social context of this group's encounters with prophetic failure. But her results are not placed in a sufficiently comparative perspective nor are they systematically integrated with the existing attempts to develop a theoretical grasp of these situations (e.g., Zygmunt 1972, Dawson 1999, Stone 2000).

Fourth, we have sought to improve the theoretical understanding of these events by clarifying one of the key social processes influencing the nature and success of the response to these situations: the degree to which leaders respond swiftly and thoroughly to failures of prophecy. The tasks that fall to the charismatic prophet in apocalyptic NRMs facing a failure of prophecy, which can be managed with varying degrees of skill and foresight, are these:

- The leader must carefully cultivate a prophetic milieu by which his or her followers are prepared for receiving and responding to prophecies.
- This often entails building "side bets" into the prophecies in the form of vague qualifying phrases, such as "the end of the world *as we know it*," or even stipulating in advance reasons why a prophecy may not come true, such as the suggestion that diligent prayer or meditation may prevent the predicted cataclysm.
- Once a prophetic disappointment has occurred, the leader must develop a plausible rationalization, one presumably building on aspects of the prior prophetic milieu and the ideological system of the group.
- A spiritualization is usually the best kind of rationalization to formulate.
- The rationalization must be communicated effectively, that is promptly, with assurance, and as completely as possible to the full membership of the group, no matter how physically dispersed they may be.
- Once in place, the rationalization should be reiterated and probably elaborated and associated with specific reaffirming activities, either new ones or reinterpreted familiar activities.

- In this regard some kind of ritual action is beneficial, either at the very moment of disappointment or soon after.
- The leadership in general must stay the course and provide a larger sense of continuity between the pre-prophetic-failure period and the post-prophetic-failure period.
- These measures will maximize the possibility of retaining a sufficient number of properly motivated members to sustain the level of in-group social support essential to weathering the failure.

The followers of these prophets are eager for reassurance in the wake of seeming failure. They are hungry for an appropriate ideological justification for their sacrifices, and for their continued investment in the group. A clear and comprehensive response by the leader can prevent the seeds of doubt planted by the prophetic failure from blossoming into mass defections or damaging schisms.

It is very likely that a series of leadership missteps, aggravated by the mismanagement of the routinization of charisma, and some unique and daunting external conditions, prevented this happening in the case of the CUT. To be more certain, we need to acquire better information about how the failure affected the lives of members and their commitment to CUT. We need to improve our estimates of the rates and levels of defection in the immediate aftermath of the failure and the reasons for the membership losses that happened later. To what extent were they influenced by the prophetic disconfirmation? In both respects we need to investigate whether the reactions varied among members involved in the hierarchy of the organization, members permanently residing in Montana, members who moved to Montana just before the fateful night of 15 March 1990, and those who remained at home dispersed across the United States and elsewhere in the world. This would be a formidable undertaking, and there is no guarantee that it would produce significant results. But if certain generic social processes played a prominent role in determining how the group coped with the failure of prophecy, there may be discernible differences. Most important, we need to know more about what was said about the prophecy in the leadership cadre of CUT both immediately before and just after the failure. Why did Prophet take so long to respond? We can offer only conjecture at this point, informed by the analysis of external indicators and the fragmentary comments of insiders—but this situation is not uncommon in research on NRMs. Given the confidentiality, if not secrecy, characteristic of most NRMs we may never gain access to the information we need, but further detective work is in order.

As we noted earlier, other scholars think alternative interpretations fit the facts better, but regrettably they have yet to publish their analyses, making informed debate difficult. We would be remiss, however, if we did not acknowledge their concerns and at least begin to explain why we remain fairly confident in our own analysis. We have been told, for example, that interviews with members, ex-members, elements of the leadership, and Prophet's children suggest that it would be more accurate to say that while many of the rank and file of CUT entered the bomb shelters on 15 March 1990 thinking "this could be it," many members of Prophet's inner circle thought that it was only a "test run," and this view was not entirely absent from the wider membership. Thus while the seeming failure of 15 March was a kind of watershed moment, it is possible that the leadership did not respond in a sufficiently timely and forceful manner because they did not see it as a failure. Rather, in line with a long history of teachings and specific pronouncements during the "shelter cycle," it was simply assumed that the cataclysm had been averted by the prayers and other appropriate ritual activities undertaken by the membership at the request of the leadership. In other words, the imminent catastrophe had been prevented by their display of faith.

This may in part be the case, but we should be cautious in these matters of accepting the claims of leaders some time after the fact, once the need for rationalization has firmly set in, if belatedly. When were the interviews conducted, with whom, and under what circumstances? The unreliability of retrospective accounts in these charged situations looms large (Beckford 1978, Dawson 1994). By 1993, when a team of scholars was invited to visit the CUT headquarters in Montana, the bulk of the disaffected members had left and were replaced by people newly rotating to the ranch for intensive training and to serve the church.

Moreover, the findings of other case studies of failed prophecies are instructive. Some evidence of hedging bets is common to almost all leaders making prophecies, even when quite specific dates are initially given (see Dawson 1999, Stone 2000). In fact it is fairly unusual for a prophecy to be made that does not include some vague phrasing, keeping the door open to future rationalizations should the prophecy prove false. After all, one of the primary and more immediate functions of prophecies is to ratchet-up commitment to the group or distract attention from other issues. So the presence of such hedging is inconclusive in itself.

If the leadership of CUT was so convinced at the time that the mass retreat to the shelters had been a mere trial run, then why, shortly after

the seeming failure, did they not emphatically announce that the test had been passed with flying colors? That is what the leader of the Church of the True Word did in Jane Hardyck and Marcia Braden's (1962) well-known study of a similar situation, as did the leader of the Institute of Applied Metaphysics (Palmer and Finn 1992). In fact, such an announcement—convincingly, promptly and widely made—assured the success of these groups in the face of seeming failure. It is more the norm for leaders to trumpet the successful passing of such tests, the record suggests, than to let them pass without much public comment.

Similarly, it is not unusual to find mixed messages about the certainty or truth of a prophecy—before, during and after a prophetic event. The vagaries of the views officials express about the nature of the prophecies is not a sound indicator of their hold on the minds and hearts of members. The classic illustration is the Jehovah's Witnesses' prophecy of the second coming of Christ in 1975 (Singlenberg 1988, Schmalz 1994). This prophecy was never officially endorsed by the Watchtower Society, but this fact did not prevent its acceptance by the membership throughout the world. In part, this acceptance may be because the prophecy was never denied explicitly either—at least not until the year passed and disappointment and defections set in, when it was vigorously denounced by the leadership, and its proponents were punished.

The comparison with CUT is instructive once again. We lack the information required to draw strong inferences about the thoughts and feelings of most of the people who entered the bomb shelters, and the accounts of leaders and others afterwards are always open to some question, given the effects of time and perspective on people's recollections. Some of our interviewees assert that they took the prophecy with deadly earnestness, while others have asserted otherwise to other researchers, saying the trip to the shelter was merely a trial run and hence not that important. Under the circumstances, perhaps the best way of gauging the seriousness with which the prophecy was taken is the evidence of people's actions in their elaborate preparations for the prophetic event and their extensive participation. Certainly, after the fact, that would be the best way to understand the significance of the Jehovah's Witness prophecy in 1975. On this key point we are inclined to leave the last word to Erin Prophet (2009: 223):

[M]any staff later told me that they did not believe anything was going to happen, but that they had not wanted to make the bad karma of disobeying the guru. They were too tired, anyway, to resist the plan.

Can actions be taken as an indicator of belief? It would be easy to say later that *none* of us believed anything would happen, and most of us did later issue some form of denial. But few people in the history of the world have gone as far as we did to prepare for divine retribution. If that does not demonstrate belief, I don't know what would.

In the months after 15 March prayer vigils were held, and it is reported that comments were made that the prayers of the faithful had helped to avert the disaster. Certainly it seems that Prophet and her immediate subordinates were backing off their prophecy, and as some ex-members felt, they were trying to divert attention away from the investment in the prophecy and the significance of the non-event. But again reliable information is hard to come by, and much of our understanding of this period comes from series of inaccurate and unflattering news reports published throughout the spring of 1990.<sup>22</sup> Recollections of this period are inconsistent, and we cannot find evidence of a systematic effort to formulate and communicate a rationalization until many months later, perhaps when leaders recognized that their more sporadic and informal efforts were proving unsatisfactory.

Finally, some researchers argue that the real losses of membership experienced by CUT are due more to later discontent with the style of leadership exercised by Prophet's executive team and the economic hardships of making a living in rural Montana, than the prophetic disappointment of 1990. These are issues we have addressed in the chapter, but we would encourage a more inclusive view. Our point is that it is hard to sort these things out. There is evidence of trouble before and after the failed prophecy. But no one doubts that the prophetic failure stands out, and it marks the beginning of a process of change in the group. We would say, rather, that the inadequate response to the failure set in motion the wheels of change. We suspect that the later grievances with the rigidity and insensitivity of the leadership are evidences of struggles over the routinization of charisma. In that regard they may be reflective of resistance to this process or its promotion over objections—or both—at different times. But we would need to know a great deal more about the inner workings of CUT at this time to make a worthwhile assessment, even if the research literature on the routinization of charisma had developed sufficiently to guide such an assessment. It is more realistic, we suspect, of to see the failure of the leadership to respond effectively to the failure

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<sup>22</sup> For example, a *Maclean's* article "Trouble in Paradise" of (May 7, 1990), identified April 23 as the date predicted for the nuclear attack.

prophecy as part and parcel of the larger and ongoing failure to cope with the routinization of charisma than it is to separate the two problems.

Could things have turned out differently for CUT? We cannot really say. Each case of failed prophecy has its idiosyncratic features. But aspects of this crisis were clearly under the discretionary control of Elizabeth Clare Prophet, and comparative theoretical analysis suggests that these factors are important. It is clear that there are specific things Prophet could have done better to secure the prosperity, and perhaps ultimately even the survival, of this once very successful new religious movement.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### FAILED PROPHECY AND GROUP DEMISE: THE CASE OF CHEN TAO

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In the summer of 1997, approximately 140 emigrant members of a little-known Taiwanese UFO group, Chen Tao, appeared in Garland, Texas (near Dallas) and declared the site a holy place where God would descend from heaven. In December, the group's founder and prophet, Hon-Ming Chen, announced that God would appear on TV Channel 18 six days before the date to warn Earth's inhabitants of the coming tribulation. On March 25, the failure of a divine appearance prompted Master Chen to retract his prophecy. However, on March 31, Chen called a press conference to minimize the disconfirmation and announced that God had pushed the apocalyptic date back to 1999. The group departed from Garland in May, and a remnant of approximately 35 members relocated to Lockport, New York. The authors traveled to Lockport in the summer of 1999 to interview Master Chen and observe the group. At that time, group members dismissed the importance of the failed prophecies and remained confident that the ancestors would soon arrive in planes from their home under the Great Lakes. Shortly after this time, financial troubles forced members to find work to support the mission. Within a few years, Chen Tao disintegrated, and members returned home to Taiwan.

Given the numerous case studies that document the ways in which groups have survived and even thrived after the disconfirmation of prophecy, the history of Chen Tao represents a highly unusual case. Contrary to the findings of Festinger, Riecken and Schacter (1956) and subsequent studies that reveal that groups typically survive prophetic failure through a readjustment process to cognitive dissonance, we have here a case study of failed prophecy in which the group collapsed. In this chapter, we explore the serial disconfirmation of prophecy that preceded the disintegration of Chen Tao. We suggest that failed prophecy may have weakened the charismatic relationship between prophet and devotees to which the leader reacted by imposing significant changes in group

structure. We also consider the cultural obstacles faced by the group whose members did not speak the language nor fully appreciate the difficulty of an extended stay in a foreign land. Finally, we argue that the case of Chen Tao demonstrates the importance of considering structural and cultural factors and conditions that may alter the outcome of a group's response to failed prophecy.

### *Research Literature on Failed Prophecy*

Just over fifty years ago, Festinger, Riecken and Schacter (1956) published *When Prophecy Fails*, a case study of a small religious group whose leader had predicted that the world would be destroyed by a massive flood. At issue was the question of how religious and other groups respond to the failure of prophecy. Festinger and his associates infiltrated the group to see what would happen when the flood that "Mrs. Keech" predicted did not come. Common sense suggests that, when faced with overwhelmingly disconfirming evidence, individuals will experience a weakening of faith in the worldview that led to the false prediction. But as is now well known, Festinger and his associates found that Mrs. Keech and her followers responded to the failure of prophecy not by abandoning their beliefs but by increasing their proselytizing activity on behalf of their beliefs. Festinger went on to formulate the theory of cognitive dissonance which argues that people will resist changing beliefs to which they are committed and that they may respond to the cognitive dissonance stemming from a contradiction between two cognitions or between cognition and behavior in unexpected ways.

Most scholars who have undertaken subsequent case studies of failed prophecy have pointed out that increased proselytization is not the only—or even the most common—reaction to the dissonance produced by failed prophecy (Zygmunt 1970, 1972, Weiser 1974, Melton 1985, Dawson 1999, Stone 2000). Zygmunt (1972) posits that the three most common reactions to failed prophecy are (1) reworking the prophecy so that the basic prophecy remains intact while the date is moved to either a definite or indefinite point in the future, (2) assigning blame for the failed prophecy to sources within the movement or outside it and redirecting movement activities, and (3) affirming that the prophecy has in fact been fulfilled, but not perhaps in the way people may have expected. Melton (1985) argues that the most common response to failed prophecy is Zygmunt's third option, in which the group reinterprets the prophecy in a

more spiritualized fashion and then argues that the prophecy has not in fact failed. Another common interpretation of failed prophecy is that the threat of apocalypse or God's judgment was a test of faith for the group or a wake-up call to the community-at-large (Dawson 1999).

The numerous options available to groups experiencing failed prophecy have led some scholars to conclude that prophecy "seldom" or "never" fails (Melton, 1985, Tumminia, 1998, 2005). According to Tumminia, "even preposterous ideas resist disconfirmation within a group's internal, unfalsifiable logic" (2005: 10). What appears to be evidence of disconfirmation to outsiders is often ignored by true believers because the former are considered to operate in a mundane world where truth cannot be spiritually understood. Indeed, Snow and Machalek (1982) remind us that the "presumed fragility of unconventional belief" is a commonsense assumption that does not hold up under empirical scrutiny.

Stark (1996) argues that, other things being equal, movements will be successful to the extent that they can construct doctrines that are not vulnerable to external disconfirmation. But religious movements have shown a remarkable resilience in the face of disconfirming events and routinely retreat to spiritual or non-empirical explanations with ease. So it remains to be shown by researchers what specific factors or conditions expose movements to susceptibility of demise when confronted with prophetic disconfirmation. Such factors or conditions are not readily apparent. For example, Balch *et al.* (1983) describe a group that responded to *multiple failed prophecies* by minimizing the significance of the literal message and by reemphasizing the core teachings of the group and channeling activities into organizational goals. After an ongoing series of failed prophecies, the close-knit community developed a "culture of dissonance reduction" which provided them with ready-made rationalizations (Balch *et al.* 1997).

A number of scholars have asserted that the response to failed prophecy will be influenced by the social conditions in which the disconfirmation takes place and in the way the dissonance produced by the failed prophecy is managed. Hardyck and Braden (1962) suggest that in groups with strong social support it may not be necessary to manage dissonance through proselytization. A cohesive community provides an insular effect that both facilitates the reworking or reinterpretation of the prophecy and minimizes the effects of external criticism. Bader (1999) argues that the effect of failed prophecy on group members will be curvilinear, such that groups with an intermediate level of commitment will be most vulnerable to demoralization after the failure of prophecy,

while those with the highest and lowest commitment levels have available to them more effective rationales with which to deflect demoralization. Balch *et al.* (1983) found that a failure of leadership to respond in a timely way led to a high level of demoralization.

Palmer and Finn (1992), in a study of two Canadian groups—one that survived and one that did not—argue that successful adaptation to failed prophecy depends on both leadership response and the construction of rituals that make the apocalyptic experience meaningful. In the surviving group, the Institute of Applied Physics (IAM), they found that the leader effectively improvised a reinterpretation of the prophecy by claiming its spiritual fulfillment and by initiating “rituals of apocalypse” that helped to cultivate an emotional catharsis among devotees. In the failed group, La Mission de l’Esprit Saint, the leader responded by exposing his own doubts and by converting to another apocalyptic religious group (Jehovah Witnesses) four months after the disconfirmation, convincing many of the members to follow him. In the latter case, no effective rationales were offered nor meaningful rituals constructed to reduce the dissonance-creating experiences of the members.

Sanada and Norbeck contend that scholars also need to pay attention to the effects that *differences in cultural context* may have on the response to prophetic disconfirmation. In their study, a failed prophecy in a Japanese sect, Ichigen-no-Miya (The Shrine of the Fundamental Truth), led the leader to attempt suicide after losing face. The prophet recovered after a month’s stay in the hospital. He then returned to the sect headquarters and “resumed conduct of the sect ritual” in which he received a message in glossalalia. The message was a reproach to the group. “The prophet stated that all members had improperly wished for at least a moment that the earthquake in fact had occurred. He stated also that the warning of the earthquake was a matter of the supernatural world, of which mortal beings as mere puppets have little knowledge and no control” (Sanada and Norbeck 2000: 122). In effect, Motoki blamed the failure on the members’ responses to the prophecy, thus salvaging a degree of honor.

In this case, we have an interesting set of circumstances. First, the prophet Kasich Motoki appeared to acknowledge failure by attempting to commit suicide. Suicide is a normative response in Japanese culture to an act of dishonor. Sanada and Norbeck emphasize the importance of cultural context in Japan where “the importance of ridicule as a social sanction” has to be considered. “If Japanese values are considered,” they argue (2000: 125–26), “the leader’s suicidal act seems to be an attempt

to vindicate impugned honor, which in turn relates to social support and ridicule, as well as internalized sanctions." Second, while the initial response was one of failure, Motoki did rebound to offer a spiritualized reinterpretation of the failed prophecy, following the pattern of many other documented cases in the West. Third, the prophet also resumed the sect's ritual(s) of apocalypse as soon as he returned, providing an interpretive framework to guide the reconstructed beliefs of the faithful and abet social support to manage dissonance. A final footnote to this case of failed prophecy is that fifteen years after the incident, the prophet dissolved the group, sold his own property to recompense members for some past donations and offered the sect property as a gift to the state to be maintained as a park (Sanada and Norbeck 2000: 123).

The organizational vitality of religious groups also appears to be an important variable. The ability of the Jehovah's Witnesses to thrive in the face of a succession of failed prophecies testifies to the fact that it is not problematic for a group with a strong organizational structure and a well-developed belief-system to manage any dissonance that may be occasioned by prophetic failures (Zygmunt 1970, Singelenberg 1989, Schmalz 1994, Stark and Iannaccone 1997). The Lubavitch Chassidim represent another group with organizational strength and a vibrant belief-system that has evidently enabled them to withstand demoralization after a disconfirmed prophecy (Shaffir 1995, Dein 1997).

Organizational vitality among the devout may also correlate with a cohesive community. Balch *et al.*'s study of the Baha'i sect portrays a close-knit but loosely structured community that became increasingly rigid and structured through the establishment of a twelve-person governing body called the Second International Baha'i Council (IBC). In the 1990s, the IBC "quickly came to dominate the lives of its members as its meetings steadily became longer and more frequent" (Balch *et al.* 1997: 86). In the face of mounting serial disconfirmation, Balch and colleagues found that sect leaders employed a strategy of *goal displacement*, where the organization's original goals were supplanted by more achievable ends. The authors note that in cases of goal displacement, group members "retreat from the initial program to a more moderate and conservative program in the interest of maintaining the strength of the organization." Whereas in the 1980s the group's primary goal was preparing for the apocalypse, "by the 1990s this objective had been supplanted by the more mundane goal of creating an administrative structure for ushering in God's Kingdom" (Balch *et al.* 1997: 88).

*The Case of Chen Tao*

Taking into account the aforementioned factors and conditions, we want to examine the response of Chen Tao to a series of prophetic disconfirmations. First, we provide a brief background and history of the group, outlining its origins and early beliefs. We then provide an account of the leader's rationale for bringing the group to the United States, and finally we describe the prophetic declarations and the responses of the leader and the devotees to the failed prophecies.

Chen Tao (True Way) was founded in 1993 in Pei-pu, Hsin-chu Province, Taiwan by Hon-Ming Chen, a 42 year old Taiwanese national. The group was alternately known as God's Salvation Church and God Saves the Earth Flying Saucer Foundation. Chen Tao is a syncretistic religion borrowing elements from Pureland Buddhism, Christianity, New Age, and UFO beliefs. The group's essential doctrines and beliefs can be found in two books authored by Chen, *Practical Evidence and Study of the World of God and Buddha* and *Gods Descending in Clouds (Flying Saucers) on Earth to Save People*. Master Chen received training and instruction from Ms. Yu-Hsia Chen (no relation), whom he believed to be one of God's messengers on Earth. Some scholars contend that Ms. Chen is the actual founder of the movement (CESNUR 1998: 2), but little else is known about her, and she remains a somewhat mysterious figure. Hon-Ming Chen embraced the role of visionary and prophet quickly in this fledgling religious movement. In one of his first messages, received probably in late 1994, Chen announced that all Gods and Buddhas would descend upon a Temple in Pei-pu. This holy ground was designated by Chen as a special gathering place, and he was purportedly told by God to build a landing site for the sacred event. Pei-pu was selected as the initial site "Since God was once seated in the holy land of Pei-pu" and because, according to Chen, "it will become the only place where the inexhaustible light of the Grand Way flows from the heavenly magnetic field of Void" (Chen 1997: 79).

Despite the exalted sacred status of Pei-pu, Chen received direction from God in 1995 to move the group to San Dimas, California, where he officially established God's Salvation Church. It was during this time that Chen began to preach that North America was the "Pureland of God" (Prather 1999: 2). Approximately 140 followers of Chen immigrated intent on preparing for God's return to Earth. These followers were primarily well-educated professionals who gave up good jobs to move to the United States with their families. Master Chen predicted that God

would appear in a flying saucer or “Godplane” to take believers out of the world just prior to an impending apocalypse, which was expected to take place sometime in 1999. No exact date for the advent had been set at this time, though many believed the date would be revealed in the near future.

Property for a new headquarters in Texas was purchased on March 26, 1997. In June, members of Chen Tao began moving to Garland, Texas, a bedroom community of 200,000 just north of Dallas, to prepare for God’s kingdom to flourish. The site was selected because Garland apparently sounded like “God’s land” to the non-English speaking Taiwanese leader. Pei-pu and Garland were declared the two sites on earth where “the Kingdom of God has descended.... [T]he headquarters of God’s Kingdom in Texas is the place where the crowd of heavenly devils is unable to drive God away by means of human power” (Chen 1997: 79).

At about the same period of time, the group made headlines across the country when Chen claimed to have discovered a man in Vancouver whom he believed to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. Chen placed ads in *The Province* and *Vancouver Sun* newspapers in hopes of alerting the holy man to the search. The prophet said he envisioned the man he called “Jesus of the West” to be about six feet tall, to be twenty-eight years old, and to look like Abraham Lincoln. Chen already had a ten-year old boy named Chi-Jen Lo in his company who was said to be the reincarnation of Buddha. Chen’s mission was to arrange a meeting between the two divine figures, an event that, according to prophecy, signaled the end-time. The meeting between the reincarnations of Buddha and Christ, however, never took place because the latter did not respond to Chen’s appeal.

The group also aroused media attention as a “UFO cult” likened to Heaven’s Gate, whose members committed mass suicide in March 1997 in Rancho Santa Fe, California. News sources from Taiwan reported that Chen Tao was a “dangerous cult” that could be preparing for mass suicide and drew explicit parallels to Heaven’s Gate (“Southern California Authorities Move on Flying Saucer Cult,” Associated Press, December 23, 1997).

By September 1997, Chen Tao members were riding bicycles through Garland distributing materials that expressed appreciation for their acceptance and lauding the community’s tolerance. Members stood out among other Garland residents as they uniformly wore white robes and straw hats. Their highly visible and distinctive presence contributed to the attention they received from both law enforcement and the media.



By December, the last of the Chen Tao devotees had arrived from California claiming to have witnessed signs and wonders in the clouds. Chen Tao drew national media coverage again in December when it announced that God would assume a physical body identical to Master Chen's and materialize in Garland at 10:00 am on March 31, 1998. It was also proclaimed that God would personally appear on TV channel 18 six days before the 31st to warn earth's inhabitants of the coming Tribulation. The divine arrival would be accompanied by turbulent weather, heavenly writings and high-speed aircraft. According to the preface of Chen's book, *Descending in Clouds*, "God will change into man and make his appearance to meet people at the holy place. Then God, the Supreme Being, will show His Three supernatural powers to explain the significance of His presence in physical body" (n.p.). The "Three supernatural powers" phrase refers to the belief that within each person there lives three souls (main soul, conscious soul, physical soul). Master Chen claimed that there must be a convergence of all three souls to perform the act of "duplication."

Speaking through his interpreter Richard Liu, Chen also declared that God would perform miracles to prove his divine power, including duplication and xenoglossia (the ability to speak in foreign tongues; not to be confused with glossolalia—prayer featuring incomprehensible speech). The act of duplication seemed to imply a claim to a spiritual incarnation of Chen's physical body, which would require no demonstrable proof:

Since God, the Supreme Being, created human beings, He can also create a physical body at any proper time. This physical body is exactly the same [as] the writer of this book in features, height, weight, and actions. The profundity of the universal truth and meaning in this arrangement is explained in details in this book (n.p.).

It is clear in a later portion of the book, however, that the duplication performance refers to a second distinct physical body: "When the time comes, people shall see two bodies with the same look appear in front of them" (Chen, 1997: 6). God would arrive in a flying saucer and appear alongside of Master Chen as a type of clone with identical features.

### *Prophetic Disconfirmations at Garland*

The March prophecies were met with a mixture of derision and alarm by news reporters. Some reporters suggested that if the prophetic event(s) failed to materialize, sect members might commit suicide following the

pattern of Heaven's Gate. But Chen Tao members denied these allegations. In an interview with KXAS-TV in Dallas, Master Chen said his group did not believe in suicide but was concerned about an apocalypse of biblical proportions in which many people might die should the public not heed God's warning. However, critics pointed to comments made by Chen in the final chapter of *Gods Descending in Clouds* in which he said he would "guarantee" the fulfillment of the prophecy "on my life" (1997: 177–78). This statement was interpreted as an indication Chen might take his own life in the event of disconfirmation and ensuing public ridicule. Furthermore, Chen apparently told a MSNBC reporter that he was willing to be stoned to death if the predicted event failed.

If these conditions were not enough of a concern, the *Dallas Morning News* reported that a member of the Watchman Fellowship, a "cult watchdog organization," was going to confront Master Chen on March 31 to discredit the prophet. Given the traditional norms of Asian culture regarding honor and face-saving, this potential public degradation ritual raised serious issues for officials. A Chinese scholar of religion was quoted in the news report as saying that "depriving Mr. Chen of a way to back down gracefully could be a real bad tactic" (*Dallas Morning News*, March 22, 1998, p. 32A).

Despite disturbing features of the escalating drama, Master Chen repeatedly dismissed the notion of mass suicide in press conferences and interviews. Chen assured reporters on several occasions that he believed suicide was prohibited by God, without exception ("Garland cult expects God . . .," Associated Press, March 6, 1998). In the weeks prior to the predicted event, the first author attended press conferences and interviewed Master Chen through his interpreter, Richard Liu. When asked how the group would respond to a failed prophecy, Mr. Liu replied: "Members will be free to leave. If nothing happens, we will conclude that God has changed his plan. But we don't think this will happen. Everything will be clear on March 31." The response to this question, we point out, already incorporated a possible reinterpretation of failed prophecy—namely, that God might change his mind. The flexibility of the interpretative frame built into the prophecy suggests early on that the group's response would not be mass suicide. The script for adaptation to disconfirmation was evidently in place prior to the prophetic event.

Master Chen's prophecy contained two parts: 1) an appearance by Christ on March 25 televised on Channel 18 across the nation at 12:01 am to make an announcement of his imminent return, and 2) the actual return of Christ on March 31 in a Godplane accompanied by the

destructive forces of the apocalypse. Shortly after midnight on March 25, when the prophecy did not materialize, Master Chen retracted his prediction and through his interpreter made the following statement to the press:

I want to emphasize that God's kingdom has already descended, God has already descended. But the pity is that the gospel of God's coming is known to too few people.... Because we did not see God's message on television tonight, my predictions of March 31 can be considered nonsense.... I sincerely hope that everybody can keep an eye on the further developments, and don't call us liars or something like that. Please trust what we say, because God really wants to save a billion people from the Great Tribulation (*Houston Chronicle*, March 26, 1998, p. A1).

Chen also told reporters that he would continue to pray and study and wait for further instruction from God. He declared his followers were free to go their own way. Garland police remained alert to the possibility of suicide. Paramedics and an ambulance were present, and the police barricaded side streets, allowing access only to news media, public safety officials and neighborhood residents. National media attention remained focused on Garland and Chen Tao as some undoubtedly believed the greatest risk of mass suicide existed in the days immediately following the unfulfilled prophecy.

On March 27, Chen Tao issued a press release and used the venue to revise earlier statements and declare a partial fulfillment of the prophecy. Reporters were told that "God was present in the form of all individuals who could realize the Supreme Being" based on Chen's teachings. On March 31, Master Chen then called a press conference to clarify further his revision of the prophecy. The prophet explained that God had entered the bodies and souls of all those present and that anyone who did not see him was denying his or her identity as human. "The kingdom of God has descended and God has already changed into human beings. You yourself are God. You are human beings as well as God. This is a chance given to us to play the role of God" ("Taiwanese sect says God landed after all" Reuters, March 31, 1998).

Master Chen went on to announce that the apocalypse would still take place in 1999, and nothing had changed the time-table of this foreboding specter. He warned of a nuclear holocaust and condemned non-vegetarians for eating meat, saying that the animals would visit them in their dreams demanding their lives back. He then issued another warning stating that people in America could expect inanimate objects to come alive, including TVs, refrigerators, beds, blankets and even houses.

Discarding the mantle of a disgraced prophet, Chen announced that the following day he and other members were going to the Great Lakes area to seek out a new training ground and prepare for the coming tribulation. Interpreter Richard Liu offered the explanation that God had changed his mind and blamed the media for ridiculing him and failing to represent Chen's message accurately. Chen then offered two tests to validate his status as a true prophet: He stared directly into the sun for several minutes and then turned to reporters and claimed that a mere mortal would have been blinded. He then announced he was willing to be stoned or crucified. The Garland police quickly surrounded Master Chen in a half-circle. Chen maintained this posture for approximately ten minutes with no response from the crowd of mostly media. One reporter finally asked for a show of hands of those members who would continue to follow Master Chen. Every hand went up in a show of unity.

The following day, April 1, Master Chen and a small coterie of followers departed for Buffalo, New York. They arrived on the shores of Lake Ontario where Chen claimed to have a vision: he saw the numbers 17 and 78 written in the sky. Following this vision, the group drove to the city of Olcott, which lies at the junction of highways 17 and 78, and held a religious service. Here Chen announced that the group was relocating to the Great Lakes region because "This is where God will transfer people from the third dimension to the fourth dimension" ("Is God Coming to Olcott?" *Lockport Journal*, April 2, 1998, p. 1).

### *Prophetic Disconfirmations at Lockport*

During the weeklong trip, the group began to explore real estate in both Olcott and nearby Lockport. On April 9, Chen and the others returned to Garland and announced that they were moving to New York. The next month was spent selling the property in Texas and relocating to Lockport. Despite the show of unity in the immediate aftermath of the disconfirmation, the failed prophecies did apparently have an adverse impact on the movement. Approximately two-thirds of the group left to return to Taiwan. Only a core group of about 35–40 devotees migrated to Lockport in May 1998 to await the apocalyptic predictions for the following year.

According to the writings of Chen recorded in *God's Descending in the Clouds*, the events of the Great Tribulation would begin in January 1999. Chen predicted that China would implement a military blockade against

Taiwan. In February, a war between North and South Korea would break out. In June and July of 1999, East Asia would be struck with floods comparable to those in biblical account of Noah and the Ark, and this would trigger a collapse of their economic structure. In retaliation for the military blockade, Taiwan would blow up three nuclear plants on the island. Then, in October, this string of events would set off a global nuclear war in which the world would come to an end. Unlike the intense media attention garnered by Chen's predictions in Garland, the failed prophecies of 1999 seemed to pass without much fanfare. There was virtually no national media coverage and only passing mention in local news.

In June 1999, the two of us traveled to Lockport to interview Chen and explore the group's reaction to further disconfirmation of prophecy. At this time, the predicted chain of events in the first half of the year had not transpired, and we were interested in how the prophet would explain or reinterpret the failed prophecies. In our interviews, we found that Chen's interpretation of the failed prophecies could be best described as a postponement of the predicted events. This reaction was expressed by Chen through his interpreter in the following portion of the interview:

SW: Some of the events that were predicted last year, or.... for this year have not occurred yet. In January, for example, you predicted China would initiate a military blockade against Taiwan. The following month there would be a significant war between North Korea and South Korea followed by a giant collapse of the East Asian countries. Has this simply been delayed or is it going to occur sometime in the future? And if so, when?

CHEN: Actually, these choices were just delayed. In the future they shall happen.

SW: Do you know when they might occur?

CHEN: It is pointless to speak of plans behind a crisis or disaster.... All of this war has been put off until the end of 1999 by God. After the end of 1999, God won't do anything to these kinds of wars.

SW: After the end of this year God won't do anything?

CHEN: God made effort to postpone the crisis of the world until the end of 1999. After that God wouldn't make effort to this extent to postpone the war. (Authors' transcript of interview with Master Chen, June 1999: 11-12).

Chen's response to the failed prophecies was to claim that "these choices were delayed." He explained that God had postponed the disasters "to the end of 1999." Since our interviews were conducted in June, the prospect of prophetic fulfillment was still in the hypothetical future. Chen also

predicted that the relationship between the United States and China would quickly deteriorate before the end of the year, serving as a prelude to the apocalypse.

Despite a mounting record of prophetic failure, we observed that none of the core members who migrated to Lockport had left the group. We also observed at this time that members showed a great deal of deference for Master Chen and that there had been no obvious damage to his charismatic authority. Apparently, the prophet's reinterpretation of serial disconfirmation was sufficient—at this juncture—to sustain the cohesiveness of the group. Based on previous research, we offer several other possible explanations for the perseverance of the group up to this point.

First, Chen Tao remained a tight-knit community. The existence of language and cultural barriers made it relatively easy for the group to remain insulated from the larger social environment. Further contributing to the insular effect was the fact that members at this time were still living off the savings they had brought with them from Taiwan and so did not have jobs that would have put them in sustained social contact with nonmembers. In addition, Chen Tao did not appear to be repeating the strategy they had employed in Garland of employing the press to publicize their apocalyptic message. On the contrary, the group appeared to be keeping a very low profile within its suburban neighborhood. No attempt was being made to proselytize at either a local or national level. Their children were attending public schools, but this did not seem to do much to threaten the group's insularity. Chen Tao did have some limited contact with the small Chinese community. The men in the group entertained us by taking us to a local Chinese restaurant which was evidently accustomed to Chen Tao and its dietary needs, since special vegetarian food had been prepared for us. For the most part, however, members engaged in daily activities together and provided a strong social support system for one another. It is noteworthy that the group was not merely an aggregation of individual believers but an alliance of *families*. The Chen Tao devotees at Lockport represented thirteen families that formed a type of extended kinship network and likely contributed to its affective solidarity.

Chen Tao members also engaged in "rituals of the apocalypse." The group erected several shrines on the property, two of which were intended to be signals to what the group believed were God's airplanes carrying the ancestors to and from an underground airbase beneath the Great Lakes. Members spent much of their day watching for signs of

these aircraft. Master Chen told us in our interview that this was part of God's perfect plan of salvation. In the event of a nuclear war, "people can be transported underworld to continue there—the evolution of life in general" (transcript of interview with Master Chen, 1999: 3). The aircraft were allegedly leaving signs for the believers and "spreading out the holy energy field of God." It was the daily duty of the group members to identify and document the flight patterns and "contrails" of the planes. We were provided a tour of the shrines and an explanation of the meaning of the planes during our visit. Members also spent time watching science fiction movies for hints about what earth may have been like in its six previous incarnations. A particular favorite was the 1997 Bruce Willis film, *The Fifth Element*, which members said accurately predicted the civilization of earth at the end of the previous evolutionary cycle. Members also spent time collecting "powerful" rocks from Lake Erie, which they used to line the walls of their house.

### *The Demise of Chen Tao*

By the end of the year, it was evident that none of Chen's prophecies had come to pass. Over the next several years, group members began moving out of the Lockport "dormitory" into private residences before returning to Taiwan in disappointment. By 2002, the remaining followers had renounced Chen's leadership and had set up their own independent Website. At present, Chen Tao has effectively ceased to exist as a cohesive entity.

Along with the continued failure of prophecy, the group experienced several challenges that appear to have contributed to its demise. First and foremost among these was the financial challenge. Chen Tao members had left lucrative jobs behind in Taiwan to come to America, where they had no independent means of support. Members lived off their savings, but eventually funds ran out. Master Chen's apparent gambling as well as his interest in raising dogs may have exacerbated problems. Eventually members were forced to get jobs, but possibilities were limited because of language barriers. The group's interpreter, for example, took a job delivering newspapers. Commitment demands escalated as the group encountered financial troubles. Members were asked to contribute up to half of their limited incomes to the maintenance of the group and of Master Chen, whose behavior was becoming increasingly difficult to justify in terms of group beliefs and goals. Chen put pressure on group

members to buy diamonds from him, to buy the dogs he was raising, and to solicit funds from family members back in Taiwan. At one point, Chen announced instructions from God that there was to be one dog for every member of the group. Although vegans themselves, members found themselves cooking eggs and meat to feed the dogs. Members who challenged Chen's authority were ordered to leave. By this time, Chen's wife was apparently so sensitive to the adverse effect that his prophetic statements were having that she began taking an active role in attempting to censor his decisions and statements to the group. In the end, Master Chen may have escalated commitment demands past the point where the investment was worth the sacrifice.

As Stark (1996) points out, new religious movements can survive defection, and sometimes defections can, in fact, even strengthen a group by eliminating less committed members. But a group cannot maintain its strength in the face of defections without a means of recruiting new committed members. Chen Tao was singularly unsuccessful at attracting new recruits in the United States. As far as we can ascertain, the group recruited no new members after leaving Taiwan. Language barriers were one important obstacle to recruitment. Only one member of the group was at least somewhat fluent in English, hence interpreter Richard Liu, became the group's only means of communicating with non-Chinese Americans. Both in Texas and in upstate New York, Chen Tao members lived in suburban areas far from Chinese-speaking populations. This limited the group's ability to proselytize among Chinese speakers. In both Garland and Lockport, members of Chen Tao were considered "model citizens" because they kept to themselves, but this insularity meant they were not able to develop social networks outside the group. When we visited them in Lockport, members were making no attempt to proselytize.

According to Stark, if a group is to be successful, there must be a moderate degree of tension between a religious group and its surrounding culture. While a group must create and promote a distinctive worldview, its ideology can't be too alien from that of dominant culture. Chen Tao's ideology, a very complex and often confusing synthesis of Buddhist, Christian and UFO beliefs, was difficult for Americans (and possibly other Chinese) to comprehend. Adding to the difficulty was the fact that Master Chen spoke and wrote only in Chinese, so that the group's ability to communicate with the larger world was entirely dependent on the skills of one member who was neither a professional translator nor perfectly fluent in English.



We now come to the intriguing question of the extent to which repeated failures of prophecy were responsible for the demise of Chen Tao. Anything we say in this regard is somewhat speculative, due to several limitations. An important limitation is the fact that our knowledge of the group after 1999 is derived totally from the testimony of Richard Liu. We were not able to observe the group on a day-to-day basis at this crucial period of time and must rely on communication with him. Furthermore, our account thus far makes it clear that Chen Tao had several organizational weaknesses. Given these weaknesses, it is impossible to infer that prophetic disconfirmation was the primary cause of the group's demise, although that appears to be a distinct possibility.

According to Liu's account of the group's decline in Lockport, Master Chen became increasingly preoccupied with rationalizing his prophetic failures. One tack he took at this time was spiritualization: Chen argued that the great tribulation had, in fact, occurred in a spiritual sense and that the people outside the group who apparently still existed were, in reality, ghosts. Master Chen also became increasingly more sensitive to perceived threats to his leadership. Any member comment that seemed to threaten his authority was met with expulsion from the group. In Lockport, Master Chen also became increasingly preoccupied with financial matters. Finally, Master Chen seems to have engaged in increasingly erratic behavior that appeared inconsistent with group goals and ideology. It seems safe to assert that leadership response after the culmination of serial disconfirmations contributed to group demise by altering the group structure. Master Chen's increasingly combative stance, including having group members spy on one another, seems to have contributed to the erosion of the strong support structure that had characterized the group. Having members pursue jobs outside the community may well have had the effect of breaking down the insularity that had been a strength of the group. Escalating commitment demands appear to have created a downward spiral whereby increasing commitment demands led to discontent and loss of community to which Chen responded with even more unreasonable demands. In addition to the weakening support structure, increasing exposure to Western values may have contributed to members' willingness to challenge Chen's authority.

While it seems fairly likely that Chen's behavior contributed to the disintegration of Chen Tao, it is harder to assert confidently that the changes in his behavior were a result of the serial disconfirmation of prophecy. Still, the connection is certainly plausible. It does not seem much of a

stretch to see Chen's increasing concern with rationalizing the failure of his prophecies as a response to the succession of disappointments that he and his followers experienced. Nor does it seem unreasonable to link his escalating commitment demands, erratic behavior, and increasing concern with challenges to his authority with the ever-growing string of unrealized predictions. It seems relevant here to refer to Sakada and Norbeck's Japanese study (2000), which emphasized the importance of differences in cultural context for the interpretation of failed prophecy. Perhaps, in an eastern group, the sense of loss of face and feelings of vulnerability and ridicule played a role in bringing about the changes in Chen's behavior.

Whatever *direct* effect the failure of prophecy may have had on Chen Tao, it seems obvious that Chen's prophecies *indirectly* contributed to the failure of the group by encouraging decisions that compromised the viability of the group. First, Master Chen's prophecies led the group to a country where group ideology was less accessible to potential converts. Settling in suburban areas with few Chinese speakers meant that the one most promising recruitment base was not available to the group. Without the potential for growth, the group's other weaknesses may have been fatal. In addition, Master Chen's prophecies led the group to a place where their long-term financial situation was precarious. Members left good jobs to come to a country where their skills were not marketable. It was only a matter of time before savings would run out. Whether or not failed prophecy led directly to Chen Tao's dissolution, the prophecies certainly led to decisions that severely compromised the long-term viability of the group.

In conclusion, we want to emphasize how the case of Chen Tao demonstrates the importance of placing the study of prophetic disconfirmation firmly within the context of the social structure and ideology of the group as a whole and of its relationships with the surrounding society and culture. Master Chen made use of many of the interpretive strategies successfully employed by other leaders in the wake of failed prophecy, but these strategies, successful in other contexts, did not work in this instance. Future research on failed prophecy should attend to these issues of culture and context as we move toward a better understanding how such groups survive or dissolve.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

### A SQUARE THEORY IN A ROUND REALITY: THOUGHTS ON THE STUDY OF THE UNARIUS PROPHECY

DIANA G. TUMMINIA

I cut my social-psychological teeth on *When Prophecy Fails* long before I became an undergraduate. It has been part of my personal library since 1962 because I treasured its scientific audacity for having gone where no one had gone before. What depth of curiosity it took to plunge into a nonsensical situation only to make perfect theoretical sense out of chaos! Therefore, when I encountered another group in 1986 led by a female psychic who touted the landing of flying saucers, I could not resist taking on a comparable intellectual adventure. This chapter revisits my ethnographic study of Unarius and its failed prophecy of the coming of spaceships that were to start a new millennium, a golden age of peace and interplanetary technology. In 2005, I published *When Prophecy Never Fails* based on almost two decades of research on Unarius. In that book and in previous articles (1998, 2002), I have argued my own necessity of shifting from Festinger *et al.*'s theory as delineated in *When Prophecy Fails* (1956; cf. Festinger 1957) to a more multi-dimensional analysis of prophecy as a functional reality within a spiritual group. My experiences explain why I shifted from Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory to focus more upon phenomenological approaches to studying prophecy. Herein I retrace the difficulty I had in applying Festinger *et al.*'s theory to my research on the Unarius Academy of Science.

#### *Beginning Research*

We found Unarius while attending a peace festival in the park. Their choir sang original hymns to the Space Brothers as Archangel Uriel (aka Ruth Norman) in all her finery waved to the crowds. Initially, my co-researcher, sociologist R. George Kirkpatrick (1943–2005), and I immediately thought of Festinger *et al.*'s *When Prophecy Fails* (1956). Uriel predicted a space fleet landing in 2001 on Unarius's property in

Jamul, which was in the foothills of San Diego near the university. We thought we could more or less replicate the classic study because Unarius was only fifteen minutes away by car. What luck! Eureka! At first, many sociologists dismissed our work, and they prejudged our subjects as weirdoes (a non-sociological word for deviants, who are not deviant enough to be significant). Yet when we name-dropped Festinger, others took the research more seriously. In 1986, the prophecy's date of fulfillment was a long time coming, meaning the year 2001. Festinger's cognitive dissonance did not seem like an outdated theory at the time, nor does it now. However, the more time I spent doing fieldwork with Unarius, the less I thought cognitive dissonance adequately described what I observed. At the time, a few studies had already refuted *When Prophecy Fails*, but many more were to come (Stone 2000).

*Charismatic Leaders: Ruth Norman and Dorothy Martin*

In a short informational digression, we can explore the differences and similarities between the visionary I observed and studied from 1986–1993, Ruth Norman, and the 1950s leader, Dorothy Martin of Festinger's fame. The charismatic leader of Unarius, Ruth E. Norman (1900–1993) evolved into her role as a celestial prophet as she acquired devoted helpmates and followers who assisted her in presenting herself as a twentieth-century space goddess from California. Ruth's life bore some resemblance to Festinger's Mrs. Marian Keech (real name, Dorothy Martin 1900–1992), inasmuch as it had earlier adult exposures to the cultic milieu. In Dorothy Martin's case, she had studied Theosophy and Dianetics—the latter now known as Scientology (Festinger *et al.* 1956, Clark 2007), as well as the flying saucer sightings of A-list contactees from whom she acquired name of the planet Clarion. A student of psychic phenomena, she became a channeler of cosmic messages by accepting the role of being chosen by mysterious higher powers. Her husband cared little about her atypical activities.

Just about the time Festinger *et al.* published *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), Ruth married Ernest Norman after meeting him on February 14, 1954 at a convention where he performed a psychic reading of her past lives. The first meeting marked the official beginning of the Unarius Science of Life. Ruth became the helpmate of Ernest who channeled scientific lessons from Infinite Intelligence as he continued doing psychic readings in person or through the mail. Ernest Norman's teachings built



*Fig. 8.1.* Holding a sceptor, Ruth Norman is costumed as Uriel, the Archangel, circa late 1980s.  
Photo courtesy of Unarius Academy of Science.



the foundation for the “the Science,” as it was called in common parlance. He lectured to small followings, as well as filmed some his lessons. Like Dorothy Martin, Ruth and Ernest Norman had already exposed themselves to alternative religions, such as spiritualism, the Self-Realization Fellowship, the Church of Religious Science, and various occult groups, like Theosophy. The Normans also conversed with San Diego psychic and contactee Mark Probert.

Ruth took over leadership of Unarius following her husband's death in 1971. Her authority stemmed from her husband's teachings, which focused upon a channeled cosmic science, past-life readings, and clairvoyant communication with planets and personalities. Ernest Norman had been a stoic personality focused on fourth-dimensional science rather than glitter and pageantry. In contrast to Ernest, Ruth emanated exuberance with a flair for theatrics, which developed into a veneration of her personas (Ioshanna 1972–1979, then Uriel 1980–1993). In the aftermath of her husband's passing, she acted as a powerful figurehead while her own abilities at channeling grew. She changed Unarius by adding flying-saucer prophecies and improvisational mythology, a situation that led to a schism shortly before her death. Early on Ruth allowed key male followers to channel with her, and thus, the volume of written transcriptions increased. The content of the channelings gained momentum with more fantastic messages from ascended masters, dead scientists and high status beings from other planets. Ruth's charismatic presence emerged. This differs from Dorothy Martin's presentation of herself as just a humble psychic who received divine messages. (Later, Martin changed her name to Sister Thedra, but she still remained reclusive.)

Uriel sought publicity and celebrity status with the help of an enduring storefront organization established in 1975. When Ruth acted the part of Uriel, she dressed as a radiantly powerful space goddess. Unarius as an organization survives today, despite Norman's death in 1994, due to the work of former students and a modest influx of new followers. In its phase of creative energy during the 1970s, Unarius utilized films, videos, tapes, classes, psychodramas, and regular celebration days. It kept up with technology, allowing a more in-depth record for social scientists to study.

Dorothy Martin's Seekers (Festinger *et al.* 1956) proved ephemeral in comparison to Unarius. Martin slipped out of the limelight after her prophecy fizzled. Somewhat withdrawn, she chose to work in Peru with George Hunt Williamson, a noted contactee. Later she returned to the United States to found the Association of Sananda and Sanat Kumara at Mount Shasta, which is still in existence (Clark 2007). Ruth Norman and

Dorothy Martin had some similarities, while they also exhibited many differences. In my research experience, I had access to more historical data and to longer first-person observations of Unarius than had been done on Dorothy Martin by the Festinger team.

### *The World of Unarius*

Entering the real world of Unarius was not easy for me because I could not understand what they were saying or follow their train of thought. At first, reading their literature befuddled me. They had published over 150 books and pamphlets, all quite incomprehensible to someone new to the subculture. Even the leaflets daunted me because the text often hopped from the greatness of Uriel to a dilettante's version of quantum theory, and then again from the healing powers of past-life therapy to communication with the planet Valnesa. Unarians had developed an extensive mythology, whose characters popped up in everyday conversation. These characters had traveled through the universe mostly by reincarnating on different planets or civilizations. I had no better luck with their channeled books. Some in the vein of the first books out of the 1950s, *The Truth about Mars* (1956a) and *The Voice of Venus* (1956b) by Ernest Norman, could be read easily enough if one could concentrate on imaginary underground cities, Martian Wars and the ethereal hospital wards of Venus. The Normans and subsequent Unarian channelers talked to representatives of at least 50 known (or unknown) planets and countless ascended spiritual planes. This earlier period clearly shows its eclectic roots in spiritualism, Edgar Cayce and New Thought religions.

After 1971, Unarius developed a more elaborate inter-dimensional, multigenerational, partially theosophical folk religion of past-life physics, heftily documented through pictures, transcriptions, tapes, videos, and endless rows of books. For example, it was easy enough to remember that Ruth had discovered that Ernest was the reincarnation of Jesus. This Unarius noted for posterity in an early book. Frequently, though, they revised their own revelations. For instance, Ruth Norman was purportedly the reincarnation of Mary of Bethany (not Mary Magdalene as indicated in an earlier book). Even though I showed them the original text, they explained to me that that passage was a mistake, and then they proceeded to make clear to me the subsequent revelations enshrined in another book. These were not rambling stories to members; rather they were scientific textbooks that needed to be studied seriously.



Seekers underwent a series of failed predictions. Before the famed prophecy that is the subject of the book, Dorothy Martin foresaw a sequence of specific sites for the landing of flying saucers. Each time the prediction proved unsuccessful, although the followers construed these disconfirmations as noteworthy tests of faith. After the third disillusionment, only five members of the original assemblage continued to stay with the group. In the face of this failure, Martin's most resolute supporters, Dr. and Mrs. Armstrong (whose real names were Charles and Lillian Laughhead), renewed their efforts to find others open to Dorothy Martin's version of spirituality.

In my mind, these preliminary disconfirmations by Dorothy Martin tainted the straightforward premise. After untangling the web of information obscuring Unarian prophecy, I found that Ruth Norman too had dozens of small and large failed predictions that did little to reduce her credibility with her close followers or reduce the size of the organization (Tumminia 1998). Unarius underwent a history of repeated failed prophecies both large and small. Disconfirmation exemplified the norm in Unarius. Yet it endured because its subcultural logic made the puzzles of internal contradictions easily explained and experienced. Followers ordinarily numbered about forty very active members and twenty less involved students of the Science (as they called themselves). They retained hundreds of people on mailing lists, and two satellite groupings in the eastern US held their own meetings.

I was just beginning my sociological career and in my naivety, I idolized several theorists and their iconic research. Ironically, I experienced cognitive dissonance about the work of the Festinger team. How could this be? It was like finding out there was no Santa Claus! Everyday life produces multiple encounters with generic cognitive dissonance (Baron and Byrne 1994, Tavris and Aronson 2007). I did observe cognitive dissonance in relation to the prophecy and around the topic of sustaining allegiance to Unarius. What was more salient to me is that members had developed cultural solutions for responding to contradictions, or what Martin Pollner terms *reality disjunctures* (Pollner 1975). Acts of explaining reality disjunctures keep prophetic organizations together, and they serve as sense-making interactions that constitute reality construction.

Pollner (1975, 1987) uses the cultural example of the Azande chicken oracle. As oracles sometime do, the process produces contradictory answers to the same question. How do the Azande deal with the contradictions? They skip the process of cognitive dissonance as they resort to their cultural-cognitive-somatic toolkit of readymade solutions to

contradictory answers. They may argue about the interpretations, but they never question the validity of the oracle. The only problem with that statement is the word, never. They may question, but probably not in their taken-for-granted reality. In other words, the oracle never fails. Unarius has a similar saying, "The Science never fails."

For example, Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson (2007: 3) write that when Henry Kissinger was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Kissinger explained away his mistakes in foreign policy in the mode of cognitive dissonance resolution by blaming them on others. For me, it is more than a contradiction: it is a reality disjuncture. That fact stumps me. Do I laugh, cry, or bracket it intellectually? I remain dumb-founded. I have no explanation or resolution to the puzzle of that contradiction in my cultural-cognitive-somatic toolkit.

What's the difference between cognitive dissonance and a reality disjuncture? First, they are sisters from different theoretical mothers. Cognitive dissonance comes from the lineal deductive world of social psychology. Reality disjuncture emerged from the inductive universes of phenomenology and ethnomethodology (Tumminia 2005). Second, cognitive dissonance implies a stop-action individual assessment to shift behavior or attitude. The interpretation of a reality disjuncture entails the fluid maintenance of the group reality through culturally prescribed answers to contradictions. Cognitive dissonance theory tends to take us through internal states of reason. Explanations of reality disjunctures prove the group's authenticity.

### *Dissonance about Dissonance*

How did I resolve this dissonance over cognitive dissonance? I followed my sense-making compass. Reviewing the literature, I found a sufficient number of critics of the Festinger thesis (Zygmunt, 1972, Balch, Farnsworth and Wilkins 1983, Melton 1985). As I became more able to recognize the multi-layered reality of Unarius, I also came to be familiar with its cultural toolkit for solving reality disjunctures. Their reality became visible to me as having been woven, patched, glued, and nailed together through the social mechanism of interpretation.

Working with my co-researcher meant that we proceeded in his typical methodological fashion. We constructed the obligatory surveys with demographic questions, and we applied Max Weber's writings about charisma to the group leader (Kirkpatrick and Tumminia 1992). That

proved to be an adequate start, but we still lacked a functional knowledge of the content of their healing practices or any competent ways of carrying on conversations with members. Ultimately, after being unable to explicate the Unarian cosmology and prophecy adequately, I shifted the main focus of my methodology to participant observation. By 1989, my ethnographic compass told me the prophecy was only one of the phenomenological threads of experience that held the group together.

### *Down the Rabbit Hole*

Festinger *et al.* saw themselves as scientifically objective observers, yet they imposed their standards for logical action and reasonable behavior on the Seekers. Their academic logic was inconsistent with the internal reasoning of the group. *When Prophecy Never Fails* reads somewhat like a chronological notebook stressing behavioral notations on a linear time-space trajectory. People who contact Space Brothers interact within a highly complex belief system. Had the Festinger team reencountered Dorothy Martin thirty years later, the content of her interpretive reality may not have been so intelligible to them. Unarius had had a longer time to develop. Unarians, as I had come to know them, operated in an interpretive universe of sacred time, a “scientific” quantum reality where the past reoccurred in the present. The storybook character Alice fell down the rabbit hole. Unarians darted in and out of interpretive wormholes.

For example, one of Unarius’s interpretive wormholes can be summed up in the phrase: “Man is a television receiver.” For instance, if I saw someone sobbing deeply during a meeting, it meant that the member had seen one of his past lives through psychic waves that worked a bit like television or radio waves on his mind’s eye. As invisible as these waves were to me, the Unarian proof of their existence showed itself through the reactions of the member. That member might see other members present in this vision of a past-life reality. This indicated a group healing was going on. My question to this Unarian would be: “How did you know this experience was real?” The answer would usually be: “I felt it so strongly and saw it so clearly that it has to be real.” That type of answer is not about cognitive dissonance, but rather about how this person experiences this group interaction as a reality. I wanted to know how Unarians constructed their reality, not rationalized it in shades of Festinger’s thesis.

Ruth predicted an important well-publicized prophecy for September 27, 1975. She had foreseen a space fleet landing of 33 ships (Tumminia 2005: 39), for which the group made extravagant plans to greet the Space Brothers. As the date neared, a trusted follower warned her to stop her plans for leaving in a spaceship. How could this be? How could she be wrong? According to follower Cosmon, the saucers would not land. This warning was an easy call because several predicted dates had already failed. Cosmon explained that Ruth experienced the vision incorrectly because she was actually reliving past-life events. This interpretive worm-hole (reliving past-life events) explained a host of extraordinary actions from failed prophecy to everyday procedures.

One of my favorite recollections came from a student named Thomas who disclosed that Ruth periodically became excited and called students to drive up to the landing site. They would hurriedly gather up some camping gear, sleeping bags, and flashlights to head for the hills where the Space Brothers were purportedly to land. Thomas tenderly remembered that Ruth told him to make tuna sandwiches for the group. Did the effulgent beings from outer space arrive? No, but they communicated with them clairvoyantly. Thus, the trip had been worthwhile.

Ruth Norman died several years before the revised landing date of 2001. Followers kept the Science going, even after a splinter group that rejected the space landing prophecy departed from full participation. This splinter group asserted that Ruth and her second-in-command, Antares, had perverted Ernest Norman's teachings. When 2001 did arrive, festivities went into full swing, including a public conference and workshop about the landing. When Ruth and Antares were alive, no one (except the splinter group or occasional heretic) openly dared to say that the Space Brother arrival might not happen. After so many disconfirmations, members reserved a public certainty and a private wait-and-see attitude. Explanations had already been considered and were recycled from the standard logic used in case of any type of disconfirmation outcome or reality disjuncture.

World events provided an interpretive loophole: 9/11/2001. Although there were three months left in that hallowed year, subcultural explanations quickly came to the foreground that said the Space Brothers would probably not make themselves visible. Here was a warlike planet not ready for intergalactic peace. How did Unarians ultimately discern an answer to their mystery? They consulted their multipurpose interpretations gleaned from feelings, somatic reactions, visions, dreams, officially channeled messages, and books that foretold details of the space

fleet landing. For instance, it had been foretold that great negative energies would be thrown up before an actual arrival. Some students speculated they were reliving past lives because an old Unarian film on planet Severus had stock footage of the World Trade Center. In an official channeling, Jack and David voiced a message from the Space Brothers telling the assemblage that they were experiencing a past-life reliving of a space war on the planet Orion. In January 2002, another channeled transmission from the Brothers told the students to think loving thoughts as that would pave the way for the much-awaited landing.

The much-touted year 2001 revealed the supreme disconfirmation, yet it proved no match for Unarian logic and its trans-temporal beliefs. Members had normalized the answers to conundrums that their reality disjunctures had routinely tested. One might analyze these typified rationalizations in a Festingerish fashion. I prefer to conceptualize their explanatory validations as the processes integral to reality maintenance, their systemized interpretations weaving an orderly pattern for interaction that made their unique social world continue and endure. Theoretically speaking, phenomenology and ethnomethodology may not be better than cognitive dissonance, although I found them more rounded and willing to encompass the details of social life that create social realities.

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## AFTERWORD

### THE SOCIOLOGY OF PROPHECY *SUB SPECIE ÆTERNITATIS*

WILLIAM H. SWATOS, JR.

As Diana has already indicated, bringing this volume to publication took far longer than either of us imagined five years ago. While I can hardly be happy about the circumstances that necessitated the delay, I can say that it did give me more time to reflect on the specific character of the kinds of prophetic utterances and groups that characterized the research on prophecy that came to the fore especially from the 1950s onward—and also, perhaps, why there seems to be something of a dearth of on-going prophecy research currently. As the volume ends, two things appear to me to be important in guiding any future research.

First, the concept of prophecy is a very old one that can be traced to prehistory. In this respect, there is an Old Testament verse that can easily be overlooked for its historical significance. In the King James Version it occurs as 1 Samuel 9:9 and reads as follows: “(Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to enquire of God, thus he spake, Come, and let us go to the seer: *for he that is now called* a Prophet was beforetime called a Seer.)” The parentheses are a part of the KJV text, not added by me; the italicized words are part of the KJV style as well, to show that they are a translator’s addition to make the text work for English grammar. I have long considered this one of the most fascinating verses of historic value in the Bible, because it means that by the time 1 Samuel was being put into writing, the author felt it necessary to explain the relationship between two different Hebrew words, one of which had apparently become obsolete or otherwise used, such that it needed some form of clarification for the contemporary audience, which is most likely an audience of at least 700–600 BCE. At the same time, the verse evidences an oral tradition that predates the written text. The concept of prophecy thus has a tie back farther than the Hebrew Bible—which is quite some time. It also suggests that religious authors had a sense of continuity to the character of what was expected from a prophet. It would be fascinating to learn precisely when and how the terms diverged, but

for the present, it is sufficient to show that prophecy did not appear *ex nihilo* in the 1950s—indeed, it has a long history and seems to be cross-cultural.

My second observation is that when we look at social scientific “prophecy” research from the viewpoint of the early twenty-first century, what begins to appear is a decidedly twentieth-century character to the phenomena that we have mostly studied as social scientists—beginning specifically with the work of Festinger and his colleagues. We can go back just a little bit before Festinger *et al.*, however, and also touch base with Orson Welles’s “War of the Worlds” radio broadcast and the dramatic reactions that it produced. Moving forward from that, we can see that what stands out in reflection upon the studies of prophecy from the 1950s forward is the technology of flight, the discovery of more and more about our solar system, and the radio-television complex. While people can certainly point to nineteenth-century antecedents, the twentieth century changed “the universe” in ways that had not occurred since the end of the fifteenth century. Yes, astrologers had watched stars and planets for centuries, but the twentieth century launched satellites and would eventually put “man” on the moon. As this happened the gap between what was once merely science fiction and what was actually possible narrowed dramatically. If we could walk on the moon, who could say that “people” from other planets might not walk on earth? Or at least come to earth to take us “up” with them not only to a new planet but also a new “level” of existence or consciousness? I can recall a wonder in the eyes of my father (whose life encompassed most of the twentieth century, but who was never either religious or psychic) at the air-and-space exploration achievements of the twentieth century that to me growing up then seemed in a sense simply matters of course. My father was born into a rural world of the horse-and-wagon, oil lamp and privy. By the time he died, humans had walked on the moon. He was in awe.

When we look at the kinds of groups that social scientific prophecy research has studied, they bear a curious affinity to the technological advances of the twentieth century. Almost always there is contact with some form of space being or some other empirical “world,” and some kind of mechanism gets people there—these may be putative spacecraft or forms of “astral projection.” The social scientific study of prophecy as we review it today is to a large extent a study of a particular kind of social reaction to the dramatic and extensive scientific and technological changes that characterized the twentieth century. My father, Mrs. Keech,

and Ruth Norman share practically the same dates of birth and death. My father remained radically this-worldly, while these two ladies and many other groups of people, both in the United States and abroad, projected themselves into different universes. What these diverse universes have in common is *flight*. My father gave up his flying lessons because of his sweetheart's fears she might never become my mother, while Mrs. Keech and Ruth Norman were willing to pass on the airlines and wait for spaceships. Twentieth-century prophets of the new world order are never expected to arrive by car or train. L. Ron Hubbard did perhaps think his boat would enable him some special kind of transition, but for the most part, however, it was flight—and flight to other realms or planets. In this respect, prophecy research has touch points with cargo cult phenomena, and some African indigenous churches and religious movements are not without a more immediate connection to the result of flight, as described in Obadare and Adebaniwi's discussion of "the visa God" in an earlier volume in this series (2010).

Additionally, I have come to this point of view about the importance of flight to the rise of particularly twentieth-century kinds of prophetic movements by something of a *via negativa*—namely, as the time between the sessions that first generated the idea of the volume and its publication grew greater than planned, I kept my eye out on programs of various professional societies for additional new papers we might consider. I found virtually none. Of course, the term "prophet" produced its share of historical papers—preeminently of the Abrahamic traditions—but almost nothing of new prophetic movements like those detailed here. I'm sure there are some and there will continue to be, but I also think this volume may mark something of an end point to the research tradition that began with Festinger and Mrs. Keech, perhaps abetted in its *dénouement* by the Heaven's Gate suicides (Balch 2002), which could not be as easily dismissed as merely some silly people out in a field waiting for a spaceship. It may be that there is a "load limit" to this particular incarnation of prophecy and that it was reached, however ironically, at Heaven's Gate.

This is not at all to say that we will never hear of prophecy again or see social scientists from time to time exploring facets of prophetic traditions and utterances in various world religions. Rather, it is to suggest that future research on prophecy and prophets will have graduated from the "school" engendered by the work of Festinger and his colleagues into social scientific and theological frameworks consistent with more main-line faith traditions, where prophetic utterances are evaluated within institutionalized religious contexts.

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